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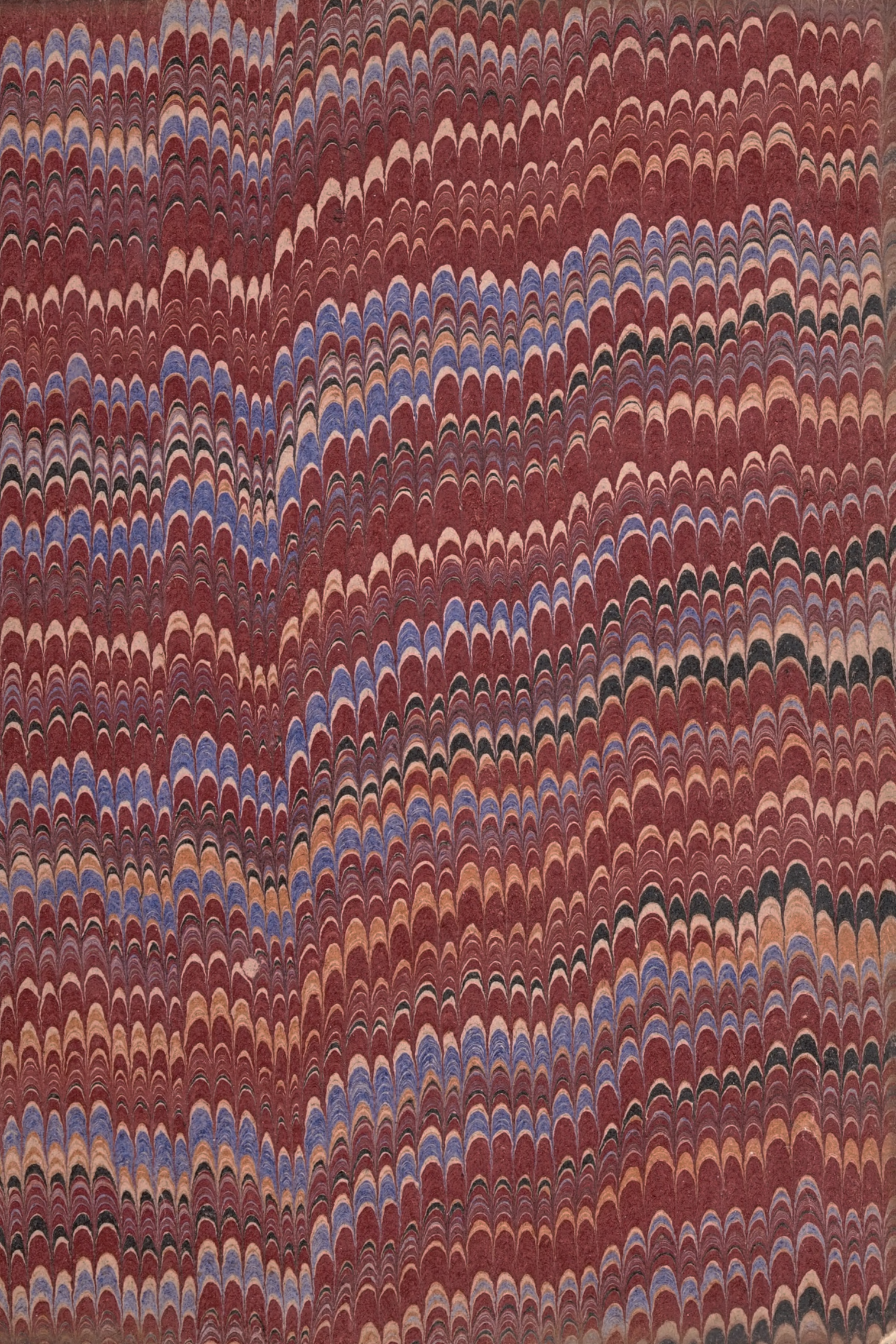
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THE HIGHLAND NURSE

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THE HIGHLAND NURSE

A TALE

BY
THE DUKE OF ARGYLL



NEW YORK
JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY

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THE HIGHLAND NURSE

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THE HIGHLAND NURSE.

I WAS born in that region of Scotland which slopes from the hills of Dumfries and Wigton southwards to the Solway Firth, and westward to the Irish Channel. It is a pleasant land, lying open to all the sun that our climate gives us, and no less open to all its winds. It is watered by many streams which in their upper course wind through pastoral valleys broad and gentle in their declivity ; but on entering the lower country they run often through narrow glens and ravines which have generally steep, and sometimes precipitous sides. The top of these, especially where a bend in the stream affords some projecting point or promontory, was a favourite site for the old castles and houses of defence, which, during the stormy middle ages, sheltered the old Barons of the Border.

In one part of this region the rivers form many

small lakes ere they reach the sea, and on an island in one of these, the famous Lochmaben, the great Norman family of the Bruce had settled in great feudal strength and splendour, long before they aspired to the crown of Scotland.

Most of those old castles are now not only ruinous, but exist in fragments only, whilst many have been wholly effaced, having been used for generations as convenient quarries for every adjacent house or dyke. Here and there some solitary tower with broken battlements, battered windows, and crumbling machicolations, catches the eye, and reminds us of the vanished mediæval life. There are, however, some of those castles which have had another fate. The sites on which they were built have never ceased to be the homes of succeeding generations, and the old massive walls have been strong as rocks to sustain the lighter structures which became possible only under conditions of security and peace. Those sites, originally adopted for defence, were continued at first from habit, and became, at a later time, more valued for the beauty of their position. The steep and rocky banks on which they stood were always clothed with wood—often the remains of the wild tangled growth of the old Caledonian forest, and some-

times the result of later planting. The views of the glen—seen sometimes far down its course—of the winding stream, and of quiet little holms of grassy meadow, became more and more appreciated with the progress of civilisation ; and so it came about that not a few houses, with all the comforts and requirements of modern life, rose gradually on the walls and foundations of the roughest and rudest keeps of the feudal ages.

Such was the house—such was the situation of my father's home. It was, and had been from time immemorial, the residence of an estate, not very large in value, but very considerable in extent. It stretched far up into the moorland to the north ; it embraced several mountain streams, and below the confluence of these, it included both sides of a valley sufficiently wide to be called a strath. Lower down, the estate followed the stream, and embraced much variety of ground occupied by small but comfortable farms. The old castle, having passed through many developments into a comfortable modern house, rose on a steep bluff of the river bank, with old trees planted at the foot and climbing up the face. The lower walls, all along the face of the bank, were the ancient walls of the original castle, and an experi-

enced antiquary of the region ascribed them to the 13th century. One of the donjon cavities, devoted of old to the safe keeping of prisoners, had been utilised as a servant's bedroom, and in adapting it for this purpose it became necessary to cut windows through the walls to admit light and air from the face of the rock on which it was founded. In the operation it was found that the thickness of the walls varied from 8 to 10 feet, so solidly built, and with such tenacious lime that the masons declared they would have more easily worked through solid rock. All through the house bits of passages cut out of this thickness,—bits of stairs, half-straight, half-winding—testified to the devices by which alone the old could be pieced on to the new.

My father had succeeded to this estate and home in middle life. His earlier years had been spent in the army and in Parliament, but on his succession he retired to the home of his ancestors, Strathgled, and led the life of a country gentleman. Planting was one of his favourite amusements, and many hundred acres of bare moorland he covered with thriving woods of larch and spruce. He had, however, also some peculiar pursuits which gave him much employment in wet weather in the house. He was a

first-rate mechanic. His turning lathes were the most elaborate and costly that could be supplied by the famous house of Holtzapfel in London. He had stores of the most beautiful tusks of ivory, and of the hardest and most richly coloured woods of tropical forests. Numerous articles about the house were of his own making, whether of wood or metal, or of both. The handles of his hatchets, for marking and pruning trees, were of ebony, exquisitely patterned when roughness was needed to help the firmness of the grip, and as exquisitely smoothed and polished where balls and beads of solid ivory were needed for ornament. A tropical nut, with shell of enormous thickness, and of the densest texture, and of lovely blended colouring, was a favourite subject for his lathe. Out of it he made drinking-cups of marvellous ovals, with ring-margins of the whitest ivory, and so dexterously worked upon the shell that the finest touch could not detect the joining. Anything and everything mechanical attracted his attention. By a mechanical contrivance hens were beguiled into registering the exact heat they developed in the work of hatching. A metallic egg was constructed, of the most perfect oval, which was divided into two halves, each half fitting into

the other by a finely adjusted screw. In the interior of this deceptive egg, perfectly whitened by a film of plaster of Paris, was introduced a small thermometer like those now used for the clinical purpose of taking organic temperatures. Under the unsuspecting and innocent hen in the middle of her maternal duties, the egg was introduced among her own, and then after a proper time, withdrawn, rapidly opened, and the temperature read off and ascertained. Then came the preparation of a little room with stoves and an apparatus for keeping up the proper heat,—its equipment with well-aired baskets full of eggs,—and in due time the mechanical production of swarms of chickens, which presently came to know their foster-parent and covered him from head to foot whenever he entered the room, with little fluttering balls of animated feathers. In such pursuits, varied by more ambitious attempts to understand and imitate the machinery of flight in birds, every day was full-handed with its own work, whilst the years passed over an improved and improving land.

My mother had died when I was five years old, and I was brought up, an only child, entirely at home, with no other education than that which I

obtained from a succession of Scotch tutors, and from my own reading out of a very miscellaneous library. That reading was omnivorous, from Grimm's German stories to the letters of Junius and the dry histories of Hume and Robertson. But my passion was natural history, and the tales of voyages and travels. Out of doors, the very early present of a small field telescope from my father was the delight of my life. By means of it I traced every song to the bird that sang it, and so came soon to identify by their notes all the song birds of the country. I used to watch for hours the habits and manners of the various species of titmice, of the creepers, and of the golden-crested wrens; whilst a very early turn for writing began in a daily journal in which every special fact was noted. The conversation of my father with eminent mechanics and engineers who were his occasional guests, was an education in itself, from the questions raised as to the forces of nature and as to the means by which they could be brought under the control of man. Works of fiction did not attract me; but the imaginative faculties were kept well awake by my father's taste for the old stories of the border feuds, of adventurous raids against the English, and above all by his love of

telling stories of the old beliefs and traditions of the Celtic Highlands. Whence he derived his knowledge of these last, it never occurred to me to speculate; but he used to tell them often with such vividness and with such easy adoption of a peculiar Gaelic accent and intonation, that his tales seemed to be the familiar echo of some loved and early days. Children are not critical, especially if brought up at home; and it was only in much later life that I remember having noticed in my father's Highland stories and tales, not only a voice and accent, but often also gestures and expressions of face, which must have come from some personality who had made upon him an early and indelible impression. Only on one occasion did I ever hear a name mentioned in connexion with them, and that name sounded to me so strange and outlandish that it speedily faded from my memory, and by no effort could I recall it on the rare occasions on which it occurred to me to try. I had a vague impression that it was a subject on which my father did not like to be questioned. This impression was confirmed by accidentally hearing a tutor of mine, in conversation with a visitor, allude obscurely to an old nurse or servant about whose story and fate there was some mystery which

was never talked of in the house, but who had been about my father in his childhood.

On the morning of the day when our tale begins, being then about thirteen years of age, I was sitting curled up in a little circular opening, more like the embrasure for a gun than a window, which had been pierced in the wall to let in light upon rather a dark corner of my father's turning-room or workshop. This was a delightful room, long and narrow, running the whole length of one of the old walls, but at the top of them, close under the machicolations where the master builders of those old days could safely build them a good deal thinner than at their base. Five large windows had been opened in it, and opposite to each window in the room the floor was occupied by a turning-lathe, there being a series of them, each adapted for some special purpose. At the head and front of all, there was a beautiful "rose-lathe" engine for doing the finest work, glittering in "barrels" of burnished brass, with a large fly-wheel, and pedals, on which the least touch sent the machinery into easy and rapid motion. The walls were covered with racks for holding tools of every shape and name, all kept carefully free from rust, bright and polished, fit for

use at a moment's notice. There were chests of small square drawers each labelled with its contents, and into which I used to peer with childish delight at the beautiful bits of wood, and the corners and chips and scraps of lovely ivory with which some of them were filled. On rows of shelves round the walls there were Hessian crucibles in "nests," and glass vessels of wondrous form such as we see in the old pictures of the dens of mediæval alchemists.

But there was one feature in the room, due to its situation in the castle, which was my special delight. The old trees which had been planted in the bottom of the glen, at the foot of the castle rock, had—as all trees will do when planted in hollows of the land—shot upwards to reach the light and air, and had grown to height rather than to branchy breadth. Their tops, well ranged and equalled by competition with each other, had, after the growth of perhaps more than a century, just reached to a level of the walls, which was a little below that of the turning-room windows, so that looking out from them we looked down on a mass of foliage or of well entangled branches. This is always beautiful, but it had a double interest to me, because these branches were

the home of a large and long-established rookery, and the domestic economy of the "crows" * was an endless subject of observation and of interest. My little embrasure-like window was a coigne of special vantage. Close to it, but a little under it, spread the boughs of a tall and healthy sycamore, on whose forked and sturdy twigs some four or five pairs had selected a specially firm foundation for their nests. The intimacy of years had made me feel the familiar friend of each of them. Year after year I had watched the graceful curves in which, with half closed wings, they dropped to the grassy slopes below; the proud and well contented strut with which they walked; the examination of the fallen sticks; the picking up of one, and then its rejection for another which seemed better fitted for their purpose. I had watched their roguish thefts from one another, and the condign punishment sometimes inflicted by the wronged ones when they happened to return suddenly and caught the pilferers in the act.

But the great entertainment was in the later spring, when the mothers were sitting close, when even a short absence was impossible except in the

* Rooks are always so called in Scotland.

warmest moment of the warmest days, and when they testified their delight as their husbands appeared in sight, bringing a much needed supply of grubs in throat-pouches well distended. The hen birds of many other species can, when hatching, do a little feeding for themselves at intervals. Flies and other insects are ubiquitous, and good mouthfuls can be caught during very short excursions from the nest. But the food of the crow has to be dug out from distant fields and pastures, and for this work the necessary time cannot be afforded by the hens. Yet the work of hatching involves a great expenditure of animal heat, which has to be sustained by corresponding supplies of food. Sitting crows, therefore, seem to be always desperately hungry, always on the look-out for the expected wings. Sometimes these come to them suddenly from an unlooked-for quarter, and then the joy of seeing their rapid sweep into the nest is rapturously and clamorously expressed. But occasionally the familiar winged-stroke, like a familiar step among ourselves, is seen from far, and the hen bird rises in the nest with fluttering wings to greet her still distant home-coming mate. It used to be one of my amusements to watch and calculate the dis-

tances at which this domestic recognition could take place. Such was my occupation on the morning above referred to, a lovely morning far on in April; one of those mornings of a well-established spring, when the air is full of life, and the whole landscape breathes in sunlight. Far away over the tops of the trees the distant view ranged over the gleaming waters of the Solway to the hills of Cumberland, which were as a faint blue shadow on the horizon. The peewit plovers were dashing through the air over every field in light. Perched in my favourite corner with a book upon my knee, I commanded the whole length of the workshop on the one side, and this glorious landscape on the other.

Inside the room my father was finishing, at the rose-engine, one of his beautiful drinking cups made of West Indian nut; thin flakes of ivory, fine as gossamer, were curling off and falling from his tool, and a soft hissing sound seemed to express the almost conscious perfection of a finished article. On turning to the other side, my eyes fell upon the patient birds sitting quietly among the green and scarlet openings of the young foliage of the sycamore. An old friend, whose nest was so near that I could almost touch it with a walking stick, had been

left unfed, as I had noticed, for rather an unusual length of time, and was sitting with her feathers rather in a bunch, with her bill resting on the sticks beside her, her eyes half shut, and what remained of them opened occasionally, winking at the sun. Suddenly she jumped up with fluttering wings and impatient cawings, and stood on the margin of the nest with her head lowered and her bill pointed straight down the glen towards the sunny south. This was the direction in which was the farthest uninterrupted view. I looked; but there was no use in my looking. The whole air was full of husbands returning home to their expectant wives with fast and steady flight. But I had been early taught some of the methods and habits which belong to accurate observation. Taking out my watch, I counted as closely as I could the number of seconds which elapsed between the sudden awakening of my hungry friend and the actual arrival of her mate. One—two—three—and so on till about 20 ticks of the second-hand of the watch had sounded, when the food-bringer dashed into the branches and was almost embraced and covered by his wife's enraptured wings. The calculation was easy. A crow flies, when at full speed and on business bent, at the

rate of at least 30 miles an hour. At this rate, one mile would be covered in two minutes or 120 seconds. Twenty seconds therefore represented at least one-sixth of a mile or a little over 276 yards. As I was conscious of having lost some seconds before I could begin to count, I exclaimed to my father: "Oh, this time I am sure he must have been at least 300 yards off and in a whole crowd of other crows!"

"Well done Mrs. Townerest," said my father, giving my favourite crow the name by which I always called her, "Well done! I am sure you would never have recognised me as far off, even if you had been very hungry, and if my pockets had been full of mutton chops"

At this moment, coming up through the open windows, the rapid trotting of a horse, and the sound of wheels on the gravel of the approach, arrested the attention of us both. Before I could gain the window which commanded the entrance of the house, the vehicle, whatever it was, had reached the front door, and nothing was visible to me except a part of two wheels, and some luggage strapped on behind.

"Look out," said my father, "who's that?"

"I see nothing," I reported, "but part of a big black portmanteau with only the word 'Captain' in

large white letters on a bit of it which is uncovered."

"Captain?" said my father in great surprise; "who can it be? Run to the hall," he continued, "and see what you can see."

The whole centre of the house was occupied by a hall, the survivor of an old one. This was surrounded by galleries off which the apartments opened; the uppermost at the door of the workshop commanded the entrance. The front door bell had been rung, and an old soldier servant of my father's, named McVicar, was issuing from a subterranean pantry, struggling to get his arms into a more seemly coat than that in which he had been at work. On his opening the door I could see a gig, and in it, seated beside the driver, there was a tall man, much muffled up in cloaks, with a hat pressed down upon his forehead: under the brim of this hat there projected a long and strongly marked nose. The chin was retiring, so that the prominence of the upper organ was all the more accentuated. Long and bushy eyebrows hung over eyes which were small but sharp and penetrating. Fixing them on McVicar when he appeared at the door the stranger said: "Is the Laird at home?"

This question was put in such a voice as I had never heard and find it difficult to describe. It was not only a deep bass, but a bass with a powerful metallic ring in it, like a note of the instrument called a trombone. It seemed to throw into vibration the whole air of a somewhat lofty hall: it made itself not only heard by the ear but felt by all the other members of the body, and especially by the stomach. Every cavity seemed to take up the resonance, and, as in the case of some of the deepest organ notes, a tremulous vibration was communicated even to the floors. Rivetted by surprise to the spot on which I stood, my surprise was in another moment intensified by its effect upon my father. "Hulloa, hulloa! the Captain, the Captain," I heard him shouting in the workshop behind me, and the exclamation was followed by the noise of falling tools, as if in his surprise he had forgotten his usual careful handling of all his implements. On looking round and through the door of the turning-room I saw the rose-engine running by itself at a furious rate, as though an unconscious kick on the pedal had accompanied the sudden abandonment of the work, whilst my father was rushing out to the gallery to meet and greet this, to me,

mysterious stranger. By the time he had reached the door, the Captain had stepped down from the gig and was just entering the doorway when my father met him. Such a handshaking I had never seen, whilst the Captain's face exhibited a new feature. When he smiled the smile was on a mouth of unusual breadth, and exhibited a set of teeth perfect in their regularity and tremendous in their size and strength. They were such a set of teeth as answered to the description of being fit to "bite the head off a nail." "Oh, Laird," he kept repeating in the same tremendous voice, as he shook my father's hand with a shake which seemed as if it would never end.

"Captain," said my father, "what on earth has brought you here so unbeknown: I thought you were in 'Hindy'?"

"So I was, Laird," said the Captain, "three months ago; but you know, Laird, there is such a thing as the sea, and shipping, and I have come home by the Cape. It's a sicht for sair een to see you again, and I thought I would just take you by surprise."

"Well," said my father, "that you have done with a vengeance! I was never so surprised in my life as

when I heard that tremendous voice of yours just now."

By this time the Captain had begun to peel off one after another the wraps in which he was swathed. "Why, Captain," said my father, "you are wrapped as if this lovely sunny morning were a day in mid-winter!"

"Sunny," said the Captain, "if you had been ten years in 'Hindy,' as I have been, you would not call *this* sunny. It is nothing but a raw haze, and I feel almost chilled to the bone by a six-mile drive through what you call the sun. But, oh! Laird," he continued, in a contemplative tone of intense satisfaction, "I'm glad to be back in the old country, and to see you, Laird, again, in the old home!"

I had now time to take fuller observation of this mysterious Captain, when all his cloaks had been thrown off, and his comforters from round his throat, and when his hat had been last of all removed and deposited with his gloves on the table in the hall. He was above six foot in height, with long thin legs, rather knock-kneed; his shoulders were sloping, his neck was long, and his brow high, leading up to a dome-shaped head, clad with long but scanty hair. Practically speaking he may be said to have had no

chin at all. But the expression of weakness which this generally gives was effectually counteracted by the high intellectual development of the head, and by the calm and penetrating aspect of his eyes.

His manner, too, was self-possessed and dignified. Very soon my father and he were both seated in the library, beside the fire; to which, and almost over which, the Captain was stretching two long and very narrow hands, which were as peculiar and distinctive as other parts of his singular figure. The library was—as it generally is in the country when it is habitually lived in—the pleasantest room in the house; and the armchairs on each side of the fire were perfect homes for comfortable chat. It was not kept as a sanctum or as a study, but was always open to all the inmates. I stole quietly in, after a little while, and took my seat in a favourite corner where there was a special shelf of voyages, and whence, looking up instead of down, I could see my friends the crows, at least after they had lighted and begun their own conversation with each other.

I had now time to see that the Captain was a much younger man than my father, who was then in middle life. They had evidently long been on

the most intimate terms : each was constantly reminding the other of some old incident of past years, and the Captain was asking numberless questions about persons and things for the most part unknown to me. But there was one peculiarity about the Captain's talk which arrested my attention. It was entirely free from any provincial accent, either Gaelic or Lowland Scotch, when he was, as it were, speaking in his own name ; but on the other hand he was perpetually introducing not only words but whole sentences in local dialects, either Highland or Lowland, as the case might be. Sometimes they seemed like quotations from old stories, or imitations from some well-known characters ; sometimes only to represent his own feeling that whatever he was expressing could be most pithily expressed in the language of the people. It was in this vein that, after a long and miscellaneous conversation on every conceivable subject, I heard the Captain say suddenly to my father :

“ By the by, Laird, are there any fush in the ruvver ? ”

“ Oh, well,” said my father, “ we must ask Willie about that ; I wonder where he is, you've not seen him yet.”

On hearing this I emerged from my corner and appeared in sight. "Oh, ho! Is this your boy, Laird?" said the Captain, rising to greet me with a long extended hand, adding, "How are you, my boy? ye were a wee wean when I seed you last;" and he gave me a grasp which I have never since forgotten,—so hearty, and so painful was it,—all my fingers seemed crushed as in a vice. But the heartiness was also expressed in a kindly smile, and in such a curious but affectionate gaze, that in a moment I forgot the squeeze and was irresistibly drawn into sympathy with the stranger.

"Oh, Laird," continued the Captain, turning to my father, "what a wonderful likeness of your father,—his grandfather! I never seed the match o' it. Oh, oh! how he brings back old days to me, Laird! Well, my boy, can you tell me anything about the fushing? Are the grilse up yet? or are there any good sea trout?"

"They are just beginning to come up," I replied, "but I have caught none myself yet. There is one pool in the river where I think you would have a good chance."

"What pool is that?" asked the Captain.

"Oh," I said, "it is a pool we call the Ash-tree

pool ; I should like so much to show you the way to it."

"Show me the way to it!" rejoined the Captain, giving me a friendly clap on the back, and adding with a hearty laugh : "Why, my boy, I could go to it in the dark ! Many's the 'saumont' I have taken out of it before you were born ! But won't we have fun in fishing it together now ?" added the Captain with such a hearty voice and such a hearty clap, that he quite won my heart ; and it was agreed that next day, after he had got out what he called his "gear," or in other words, after he had unpacked his rods and flies, we should have a day together on the river.

Next morning accordingly, the Captain had got ready such "gear" as I had never seen. In passing through London he had equipped himself with a most beautiful rod, with a collection of flies tied by an Irishman of the name of Evatt, who, the Captain informed me, was the most perfect artist he knew. I gazed at them with wonder and admiration, such combinations did they exhibit of golden pheasant, of the Indian jungle fowl, of drake's wing, of green and purple mohair, with gold and silver thread exquisitely twisted, and so tightly that it seemed able to

stand any amount of wear and tear. In the interests of the gentle art, and for the benefit of any one who may ever hope to fish in the Douglas water of Strathgled, I may say that the wings of one fly were of drake's feather, the body was dark blue with silver twist; another had a tail of golden pheasant hackle unlike anything carried by any fly in the world, but which the "saumont," as the Captain called them, seemed to consider quite irresistible when they would take anything at all.

The Captain put up his rod with the utmost care, the joints adjusted so that the rings on each were exactly in a line with each other, and the line was re-wound upon the reel, so as to prevent the possibility of kinking, or being entangled in a knot. The casting line was selected so as to suit the fulness or fineness of the water, respecting which he cross-questioned me as to the amount of recent rains. Then, choosing a fly, which I at once recognised as corresponding in size and colour to the ruder specimens I used to get from Carlisle or Dumfries, and as just the very best for the season and the state of the water, the Captain, after careful stretching of the gut, hooked it on the upper bar of his reel, shouldered his rod, and broke out with his long legs into a sort

of shambling jump or dance, shouting "Hurrah! it's fifteen years since I have had a salmon rod in my hand, and oh! Willie," (addressing me for the first time by my name,) "won't we have fun to-day?"

"Fifteen years" seemed an age to me, as it went back two years before my own birth, and made me look with some awe on one whose memory was so fresh of events which were to me so distant. But on the other hand I felt instinctively that the Captain was even more of a boy than I was. His glee, his look of intense enjoyment, his constant exclamations of delight, his bursts of hearty laughter about, apparently, nothing, were all childlike. I did not then know what it is to be once more at home among the familiar scenes of youth after a long residence in a foreign, and especially in a hot, climate. But his spirits were contagious, and so we raced together down a steep path which led under the trees of the rookery to the meadow through which the river wound. Ere we reached it we had to pass a bank of daffodils which were just bursting into full flower, and which threw the Captain into an ecstasy of delight. "Oh! me, me!" he exclaimed, "just as I left them fifteen long years ago! I declare, I think they have been in perpetual bloom ever since."

Passing through this bank of daffodils, we soon reached the river, which we at once saw to be in first-rate order for careful fishing. It was not foaming or racing as rivers do after heavy rain—a state in which it might be fished in the rougher water by the most unskilful fisherman—but it was distinctly “raised”; with all its shallows sharpened, and all its deeps dimpled with an ampler current. Looking up the Strath, its rapids were reflecting the sky in a deep purple blue, whilst looking downward and southward, they were sparkling like a thousand diamonds, and melting into pools of a silver sheen. There was no taint in the water, but just a slight tinge of a rich yellow brown, clear as crystal, from the far-off peaty hollows in which the rain had fallen.

“Oh! she’ll fush the day,” said the Captain, with the glance of a well-trained eye, “but she’ll need fine taickle and fine casting.”

Saying this, he at once began to wet and to straighten his line, by casting it into some rough shallow water, a process which he continued for some time until the whole of it was thoroughly soft and stretched. A few minutes’ farther walk, down the meadow rich with young daisies and bursting buttercups, brought us to the Ash-tree pool, where

the Captain at once began to fish it. His art was perfect. His line shot out from his rod straight as an arrow, and fell on the water with such lightness that even at the smoothest parts its fall was hardly visible. He began with a short line at the throat of the pool: every inch of the water being carefully tried, but with not more than two casts. Where the pool became less rippled and long tracks of foam-bubbles began to appear, the line was lengthened, and it fell soft as a snowflake among them. The corners of an eddy near the opposite bank were carefully searched by such beautifully accurate casts that the fly seemed always to light exactly on the spots where a "fush" would lie. At one point, but only for a moment, there glanced out underneath the surface a rapid silvery gleam.

"There he is," shouted the Captain, "but a very shy rise. Now I'll give him time;" and casting the line far behind him, he let it fall on the fragrant grass, and then, throwing himself down upon the bank, he said:

"I'll gie him five minutes' rest."

"Surely," said I, "that is a long time."

"No, it is not," replied the Captain, and then he proceeded to explain: "If you get a keen rise in a

high water, you may cast over him again in one or two minutes, and have as good a chance as by waiting half an hour ; but if you have a very shy rise in a low water such as this, you must give him time to forget all about it, and to have nothing remaining in his fishy mind except the vaguest sense of expectation. Now mind that, my boy ! it will be a wrinkle for ye in the noble art of fly fishing.”

The five minutes were spent by the Captain in gathering all the daisies he could reach. No child of a few years old, brought out of a London alley, where it never saw anything more than the dirty pavement, could have been so intent on this occupation as this very long and very full grown man, with his stately manners and his military bearing. The operation was accompanied by an inward chuckle of delight,—like that of a cat, or rather like that of a tiger purring—and by a few broken whispers of “ Oh ! me, me ! ”

Long before the five minutes had elapsed, he had gathered a large bunch which he proceeded to bind together in the approved manner with stalks of grass. With amusement and impatience contending in my mind, I at last ventured to say :

“Now, Captain, I think you may leave your daisies and try the saumont.”

“None of your sauce, you young hound,” said the Captain with just a touch of real irritation in his voice, “if you had been as long away from the sight of daisies as I have been,—more than the whole of your little life—you would not have thought it a bad diversion to gather them. Oh! me, me!”

Then, gathering up his long straggling arms and legs into a most wonderful complicated knot beneath him, the Captain rose with a jerk to his full height; stooped again to pick up his rod, and striding the two steps which alone separated him from the river, he looked into the stream with a close and steady gaze. The water was falling rapidly, even a few minutes made differences visible to an accustomed eye. Bubbles which had before taken one route began to swerve into another: wrinkles and lines of current which had roughened the water here and there were becoming erased, and were melting away into surfaces smooth and shining. The Captain began to cast some way above where the fish had risen.

“You,” he said, with some emphasis on the word, “you, would cast your fly just where he rose before, but an old fisherman like me knows better.”

Then followed some casts which were lovely to an angler's eye. The line fell like a gossamer some distance up the stream, the fly reaching the water not only above but beyond the spot, so that, as the fall of the rod told upon its course, it swept gently and diagonally across the stream. Each new cast repeated the operation till the sweep of the fly passed smoothly and naturally a few inches above the spot where the fish had lain. Again the glance of a silver gleam, vague and subaqueous, yet clear enough to shine to our bank, announced that the "fush" had again risen, but had again also shied the lure.

"No chance of him again to-night," said the Captain, and at once began to reel up his line; but added, half to himself, half to me, "there is no more chance to-day, except in the Saughie Hole; have you tried that pool yet this year?"

"The Saughie Hole," I replied, "I never heard of it."

"Ye never heard tell of the Saughie Hole! you that were born and bred up on this Douglas water! Well, well, that beats a'!" replied the Captain with scorn in his eye. "Well," he continued, "I'll tell you about it. About a quarter of a mile below us, where the water is running thin and clear, it enters rather

a deep hole on this bank, where an old saugh* used to grow. When the water is high or rising, no fish ever rests in it, they are bent on pushing on. But when the water is falling, as it is now, they do rest in it,—and many's the good 'fush' I hae ta'en oot o' it."

Just a little piqued by the Captain's superior knowledge of my native river, and also not a little incredulous about this new "hole," I said:

"Well, Captain, will you try the hole, and let me try for a dish of trout in the water you have already fished?"

"By all means, my boy; I daresay you'll beat me, at least in numbers." Whereupon he stalked off down the stream, whilst I began in the pool beside us, and fished carefully for trout. They were rising freely, and in a few minutes I had basketed some half dozen and was carefully approaching water where I knew the bigger ones habitually lay, when I observed the Captain stop, unreel his line, stand well back from the bank, and prepare apparently for fishing with a short line as close as possible to the bank on which he stood. Just at that moment I hooked a

* Scotch for willow—doubtless the same root as the Latin *salix*.

good sea-trout of about three pounds' weight, the fish which above all others gives the finest sport to a light rod and fine tackle. I had been thus engaged about a couple of minutes, when I was dreadfully startled by a noise coming from the direction of the Captain such as I had never heard before. It was something between a shout and a bellow and a roar, ending in a fearful yell. Panic-stricken, I could only think of a description which I had been lately reading of the fiendish noises by which the rudest savages have sometimes carried dismay and disorder into the ranks of a civilised army. My next thought was that the Captain must have fallen into the river and was shouting for help; so, throwing down my rod and abandoning my beautiful trout, I rushed off down the stream, hearing, as I left, my own reel ringing with a corresponding rush of my derelict fish. My alarm was increased by not seeing the Captain, and was only relieved when, after running some hundred yards, I saw him come out from behind a bush, and saw also from his attitude that he was what anglers call "giving him the butt" to some heavy fish. Three tremendous leaps out of the water, performed in rapid succession, revealed a large salmon, all gleaming in the silver sheen of a

fresh run fish, and fighting for his life against the hook and strain of line in which he had become so suddenly entangled. With every fresh leap the Captain greeted him with the yelling shout of excitement which had struck such panic into me ; but by the time I reached him, both these creatures had settled down to the steady tug-of-war, the violent rushes of the fish being met by the free running of the line, accompanied by the noise with which no music may compare to the angler's ear.

“Mount my clip,” shouted the Captain to me as I approached, “you’ll find it telescoped up on the bank opposite the pool, the ‘Saughie Hole,’ which you knew nothing of, you guddah !” *

Suffice it to say that, after some splendid sport and the most dexterous management, a beautiful salmon of about 12 pounds was brought exhausted to the surface, and within easy reach. I clipped him with success, but the operation led to convulsive struggles which made it a difficult and dangerous operation to lift him up rather a steep bank. It was only accomplished by aid of the Captain, who, when the fish was fairly extended on the grass, broke out once more into the same cries as before,

* Indian word for a goose, or foolish person.

but accompanied this time by repeated wavings of his bonnet round his head, as high as his long arms could lift it.

“Now, my boy,” said the Captain, when these transports had subsided, “do you keep a journal.”

This was a home question to me, for as a matter of fact I did keep a journal, but very secretly, for I was very shy about it, never wrote in it except when quite alone, and had it hidden in a drawer of which I kept the key. It was chiefly a journal about birds and beasts,—what company the gold crests and creepers and the blue tits kept in their winter flocks,—what the cole tits did when searching on the ground,—all the doings of my favourite crows in the nesting season, of their occasional assembling in the winter, and of the preluding visits in the early spring. Somewhat startled by the Captain’s question, I replied :

“Well, sometimes I put down what I see out of doors.”

“Well,” said the Captain, “you’ll put down for to-day two things you will never forget, if you live to the age of Methuselah ! the first is that you have seen the first salmon taken out of the Saughie Hole—and it’ll no be the last, I’m thinking;—and the

second is, that you have heard for the first time the war-cry of Badenoch ! ”

“ Is that what you call the noises that you have been making now ? ” I asked.

“ Noises ! ” said the Captain in a voice of thunder, “ noises indeed ! ye graceless loon ! Is that what ye call the slogan of my clan ? Before I have done with you, I’ll teach ye better manners.”

“ Then,” I said, laughing, but with just a little malice in my heart about the Saughie Hole, “ Captain, where’s Badenoch ? ”

“ Where’s Badenoch ? ” repeated the Captain, “ hear tull him ! It’s my home in the Hielands, the country I come from, and there’s no a spot in all this driech county o’ Dumfries that can hold a candle to every nook and corner o’ Badenoch, forbye all that its clans hae sung in love, and hae done in war ! May be ye’ll see it some day, and then ye’ll never come back to the Solway. But come hame,” added the Captain, lifting his rod, and stooping to lift also the salmon by the gills.

“ It’ll take us both to carry that salmon home comfortably,” I said ; and, cutting a strong but supple twig from an alder bush, and passing it through the gills, we were soon on the road home,

each of us carrying one end of the stick. On the way the Captain was in high spirits, full of anecdote, and full of words and phrases, some of which I at once recognised as taken from one or another of my father's ample store of Highland stories.

"I see," I said at last, rather shyly, "that you know a whole lot of my father's tales of your country; do you know at all where he got them? for I never heard him say that he had been there himself."

"No," said the Captain, "I don't know; and I never asked, because I know there is some mystery on the subject. There was one old woman I recollect in this place when I first came here, who was supposed to know something about it; but she must be dead and gone long ago."

"Who was that?" I asked, "do you remember her name?"

"Well," replied the Captain, "I do remember; it was such a strange one; but it won't help you much to know it, for she must be in the kirkyard now. It was Nelly Leggy."

"Nelly Leggy!" I rejoined with great astonishment, "she is alive and well. I was speaking to her only yesterday. She keeps our poultry yard."

“Nonsense,” said the Captain, “you don’t mean that!”

“Oh, yes! I do mean it,” I replied; “let us go home by her cottage, it is not three hundred yards out of our way.” So, after picking up my own rod, we left our path, and striking up the brae through a little screen of wood, we were soon at the poultry yard, and found the old woman as usual, busy with her chickens inside a yard fenced with young larch poles nailed as closely together as they could be placed.

“Well, Nelly,” said the Captain, “hoo’s a’ wi’ ye? I’m glad to see you again. It’s a while since we twa hae met.”

The old woman, who stooped much, had some difficulty in raising her face to the proper angle, to enable her to see her questioner; but when she succeeded in this manœuvre, she eyed him closely, and then stretching out two very skinny arms she exclaimed:

“Gude guide us—if it’s no the Captain!”

“It’s just him,” I said.

“Whaur i’ the warld hae ye been sin’ we seed ye here?”

“I’ve been in Hindy, Nelly; did you ever hear o’ that kintray?”

“Is na yon the place that they tell me a’ oor fools cam frae, first o’ a’?”

“The very place,” said the Captain.

“Eh, weel,” replied Nelly, “it maun be a gran’ place yon, whaur the verra wuds are fu’ o’ chuckens!”

“Now, Nelly,” I interrupted, “will you give us a cup of your tea, and one of your ain bannocks? for I’ve tellt the Captain that naebody bakes bannocks like you?”

We were soon seated in a tidy little room, well supplied with excellent tea and bannocks, warm and toasted, from the fire. It will have been gathered from what has been already said, that Nelly was a “character.” As such she was well known all over the country side. She was an old maid, a tremendous gossip; and her weakness was to be credited with knowing everything about everybody for the last half century at least. The Captain, recollecting this, brought the conversation gradually round from Highland drovers passing into England by Carlisle with long herds of cattle, to the subject of Highlanders in general, and Highland stories in particular.

Nelly shared that extreme dislike of the whole Highland race which was at one time ingrained and hereditary in the Lowlands ; due to the tradition of the sufferings which that race had inflicted upon adjacent " Sassenachs " during many centuries.

" They're a wild folk," she said, shaking her old head viciously, but at the same time with just a manifest touch of fear and awe ; " ye canna lippen* on a word they say ; and they're that cunnin' an' fair spoken-like, that, for a' ye ken that weel, ye canna but believe them when they're fornent ye ! And then, gudesake ! wha awfu' tales they tell o' ghaists, an' warlocks, an' o' veesions that they ca' second sight ! It's just fearfu' to hear them ; and the warst o' it is that what they say comes true, ay, ower aften ! I whiles think,—the Lord forgie me !—but I canna help it, that they hae traffic wi' them that they su'dna."

" Nelly," said I, laughing, " div ye no ken that the Captain's a Hielander himsel' ? "

" Hoot toot," replied Nelly with spirit, " the Captain should na speer o' me,—and naebody need speer o' me, that does na wish to hear the truth."

" Well done, Nelly," said the Captain, " I like a

* To " lippen " means to trust, to believe.

body that sticks to what she's said. I am a Highlander ; but I ken fine the faults o' my ain countrymen, though I'm no sae very sure that their second sight is one of them. But, Nelly," added the Captain, seeing that Nelly's roughened feathers were smoothing down like those on one of her own cocks, "how came it that oor Laird's sae fu' o' Hieland stories? He micht hae been a Highlander himsel', he cracks sae weel aboot them. They tell me it was some old nurse he had when he was a boy that tell't him a' thae tales."

"Wha tell't ye that?" said Nelly, with her quick little eyes glancing at the Captain's face.

"Well, Nelly," replied the Captain, "I'm no sure that it was na your ain sel', the last time I was here."

This reply seemed at once to conciliate Nelly ; and she said in a low, half-musing voice :

"Weel, it's no like it was onybody else. It's saxty year, come June next, sin' I came here wi' my father, when I was but a wee lassie ; an' o' a' the folks that were aboot the tcon then, there's no a leevin' soul noo."

"And did ye see her yoursel'?" pursued the Captain, hearing the more placable and confidential

tones which had now crept into the naturally loud and strident voice of the old woman.

“Ay, did I,” replied Nelly; “an’ them that seed her are no like to forget her. She was an awfu’ wumman yon!”

“Awfu’,” said the Captain, “why was she awfu’?”

Nelly looked behind her to see that the door of her little room was shut, and that not even one of her own hens could hear her. Then, resuming the conversation in a low tone, subdued and almost tremulous, she said, as if she had already gone too far: “Ye may na’ think I’m speaking ill o’ the wumman when I said she was awfu’! I was but young when I seed her; but, twa or three times afore she gaed awa’, she frichtet me that sair, the vera luik o’ her, that, I mind weel, I ran off to the wud that’s ahint the hen hoose, an’ cooered doon amang the scartin’ places o’ the chuckens aneth the busses.”

“What frichtet ye, Nelly?” said the Captain; “was she so ill-looking or so crosslike that ye feared she wad gie ye a skelpin’?”

“It was na that, Captain,” said Nelly; “the wumman was fair spoken, an’ weel luikin’. She had lang hair, as black as the raven’s wing. It hung doon

maist to the sash she had roond her middle: an' div ye ken, Captain, whan the sun glinted on it there came a glamour oot o' it, like the glamour o' the sun on the Solway when the clouds are broken efter thun'er. Mony's the day I hae seen that shimmer on the sea; an' mony's the day I hae said to mysel' — 'By a' the warld, that's jist like the shine I mind sae weel on Elspie MacGregor's hair!' "

"Was that her name?" interrupted the Captain; "well, I never heard that before."

"Weel, Captain, I'm no sure that I meant to tell ye her name, for it's lang sin' it's passed my mooth; but ye see it jist cam oot whan I was tellin' ye what it was that sae frichtet me when I was a wean. But it was na her hair, an' it was na her voice, for I heard her speak to my faither ae day, an' she was douce an' freendly like in a' she said. But it was her gran' luik. She micht hae been a queen, jist aff o' her throne; an' whan she luiket at me, I jist felt as if she luiket me a' through, an' seed somethin' or somebody ahint me. Never sin' syne hae I seen a glower like yon! But the Lord forgie me," said Nelly, after a moment's pause, "if I say onything ill o' that wumman—for the neist time I seed her I wasna frichtet; for the young laird—him that's oor

ain Laird noo, but was a wee boy then—was wi' her that time; an' it was bonnie to see hoo he spieled up aboot her an' held her haun' an' kissed her, jist like ane o' my ain chucks wi' it's ain mither. Eh! she was an awfu' wumman, but she was a gran' wumman, tae. I'll never see her like again! But it's you, Captain, that's garred me speak o' her, this day; for I dinna like it, an' the Laird, he disna like it; an' there's naebody but mysel' an' him that has ony mind o' her."

"Well," said the Captain, "what became o' her?"

"Eh," said Nelly, "naebody kens that. The Lord only knows!"

"What do you mean, Nelly?" said the Captain; "you don't mean that this gran' woman was lifted like Elijah frae the earth!"

"Ye dinna think, Captain," said Nelly, "that I wad tell ye siccan a lee as yon! But I'll tell ye what I ken, an' it's nae much to tell. Thae Hieland weemen ye see are awfu' prood. They say that we low country folk hae nae mainners; an' when we say to them what we say till oor ain folk, they get a' up in a low * jist in wan moment. Something gaed wrang at the castle; naebody kens what; an'

* In a flame.

the auld Laird said something that Elspie wad na thole. Weel, the neist mornin' Elspie was na to be seen. The auld Laird was awfu' pit about; an' the wee boy he grat even furrit, till he was maist deid wi' grief. At first the auld Laird was feared that the wumman had pitten hersel' in the watter; an' he had jist gi'en orders for a' the pools to be dragged wi' men. But some ane cam' up frae the kitchen an' said that Elspie had ta'en awa' a sma' bit o' a kebbuck cheese an' had left twa shillin's on the dresser as valey for't. An' the auld Laird he stoppit the search i' the watter; for he said the takin' o' the cheese maun hae been to keep her leevin' amang the hills, while she wad tramp it hame. 'The wild hawk's fled back till her ain nest' were the words he used."

Old Nelly now folded her hands upon her knees in token that her tale was done, looking at the same time both cunning and important.

"Well," said the Captain, "Nelly, I think ye're an awfu' wumman yoursel'—kennin' such a lot o' things that ither folk dinna ken. But I've a strong suspicion, Nelly, that ye ken mair nor ye hae tell't us yet. Ye see this is no desert country that such a wumman as ye describe could be speerited awa'

without being seen by somebody. Did naebody see her sittin' under a dyke eatin' a bit o' the kebbuck that ye hae tell't us o'?"

"Hoot awa," said Nelly, with some assumed indignation, "ye dinna ken thae Hielanders as I ken them. They'll jist lie doon i' the bracken or the heather, row their plaid aboot them an' sleep half the day an' the haill nicht; an' ye micht pass by them on thae hills within a wheen few yairds, and never see them frae the grey stanes, nae mair nor ye can see a muirfowl* when it's at your verra feet. Hech! but wi' your leave, Captain, they're awfu' cratur's! and they're that consaitet! Ye ken, Captain,—tho' ye dinna speak it yoursel', God be thanket,—ye ken that fearful lingo that they speak—weel, ye'll no believe me maybe, but it's as sure as deith—ane o' thae Hielan' drovers tell't me to my face ae day, up on the ro'd yonner, that his lingo was what Adam spak in Paradeese! 'Was it,' says I, 'then I'm wae for Eve,'—an' I left him wi' his mooth open i' the middle o' his beasts!"

"Well but, Nelly," said the Captain, laughing heartily at the old woman's spite towards his coun-

* Grouse.

trymen, "ye surely dinna think that, if Adam spoke Gaelic, his wife would na speak it too?"

"Ay, div I," replied Nelly, with heat. "God Almighty wad surely never mak' twa cratur's to speak yon lingo! Na, na, if she ever spak it, she maun hae been garred by her man! I ken better whaur the Gaelic came frae. It was jist frae the confusion o' tongues at the toor o' Babel; an' a bonnie confusion it is!" Nelly's wrath being now apparently satisfied, the Captain resumed his inquiries.

"Well, well, Nelly, ye'll never tell me that the very last sight seen o' Elspie MacGregor was the night afore she gaed awa', and nae glint o' siccan a gran' wumman was ever seen again. Come, now, Nelly, ye ken mair nor ye hae tell't us!"

"Kennin'," said Nelly, "is ae thing, an' tellin's anither, but I'll jist tell ye this. It may hae been aboot a month efter the ca'-through at the castle, there cam' a Hielan' packman on a pownie frae the north; an' I mind him comin' to my faither's door, the verra door that's noo ahint me; an' he had a bonnie pack, an' he unpacket it at the door, an' I mind weel—for I was a wee thing then—I was awfu' ta'enup wi' the bonnie things I seed in yon

pack; an' my mither she bocht some needles, an' my faither he bocht a wee kame an' some sweeties that he gied to me. Ye see we were but puir folk, an' my faither hadna siller to spend on whigmaleeries. But the cadger seemed a raal dacent man; an' my faither was 'maist black affrontet to see him unpack amaist a' he had to show till us. So my faither asket him in to tak' a cup o' tea an' some taties that were doin' for oordenner. Weel, ye see, the cadger was sittin' jist whaur ye're sittin' noo, Captain, when my faither tell't him o' the wumman that fled awa' no four days gane by. 'What like was she?' said the cadger to my faither; an' my faither he jist tell't what I hae tell't ye this day. Says he: 'She was a heich wumman, raal lang i' the leg, wi' black hair that was aye hangin' amaist doon till her waist, an' a kin' o' gran' luik about her.'

"Gude sakes," said the cadger, "then I hae seed her!" an' wi' that he brocht his haun' doon wi' a thud on the table that garred it shake.

"Ye're no tellin' me that," said my faither; "an' whaur in a' the warld did ye see her?"

"Weel," said the cadger, wi' a scared luik in his face, "I'll tell ye. Ye see I hae to come an awfu'

wild ro'd comin' frae the watter o' Clyde doon to this kintray. Ye may say it's no a ro'd ava', but jist a kin' o' track ower the taps o' the hulls; an' whiles it's maist lost a'thegither in the heather an' brackens. But I hae kent it this mony a year an' I hae a douce beast o' a pownie that kens it as weel as mysel'. We—that's me an' my pownie—had sterted early i' the mornin', for we had a lang tramp afore us,—like aboot five o'clock; an' aboot sax we were heich amang the muirs in a wild fog that cam' on. The ro'd was alang a steep brae, wi' a deep glen on oor left haun'. Weel! a' on a sudden my sheltie gied the awfu'est loup aff the ro'd to the richt haun', an' pricket baith his ears, an' gied blaws thro' his nose, jist as gin he had seen some wild beast. I luiket a' roond, but I could see naething but a grey stane on a wee bit o' heather knowe aside the ro'd; but the wild luik o' the puir sheltie feared me, an' my verra hert cam' a' up into my mooth, maist o' a' when I seed the grey stane, as I thocht it was, begin to warstle an' move as if it was a leevin' cratur; an' then, afore I could get my breith, the grey stane stood up on twa legs, an' I seed an awfu'-like wumman wi' her twa hauns lowsins' like the plaid that had been ower her heid

an' ower her haill body. At first I thocht it was a wraith, or a witch or onything else that's no canny, but syne I seed that she had a wee bundle beside her on the muir, an' I seed her lift it, lootin doon to grip it; an' long black hair fell oot o' the plaid that was ower her heid. Then I seed it was a raal wumman, an' I thocht she was gaun to tak' the ro'd an' come by us. But instead o' that, she jist steppit across it an' set aff walkin' at the awfulest pace richt up the face a' the hull—gaun due north as straicht as the whaup* flees. By this time I had gotten my breith again; an', as there was something aboot her that gied me the notion o' a Hieland wife, I thocht it wad be ceevil to speak, so says I, speakin' lood in the Gaelic, "it's a driech cauld morn, gude-wife!" Weel, she jist stalket on an' ne'er gied me back a word, though I seed fine she understood what I said, for she kin' o' stertet whan she heard the Gaelic, and gied a wee bit sprachle wi' her haun', as meikle as to say, "I hae nae time to haver wi' the likes o' you!" Weel, I gaed on; an' in aboot half an oor the fog cleared aff, an' I luikit back up the hulls the way she went, jist to see if I could see onything o' her. An' sure eneuch, on the sky line

* The curlew.

on the verra tap o' the heichest hull atween this an' Clydeside, I seed the wumman, mair like a cairn than a body. Noo,' added the cadger, 'yon maun hae been the wumman ye speak o'. I niver seed naebody else the like o' her; an' she was gaun straicht i' the line frae this kintray to Clydeside.'

"'It was the verra wumman,' said my faither. That's jist what he said," added Nelly, and resumed her favourite attitude, with her two hands crossed in front of her knees; an attitude of great self-satisfaction, in expectation of the compliments due, and generally given, by those who listened to Nelly's yarns.

To my great surprise, the Captain, though evidently much interested and listening with all his ears, did not seem satisfied that he had yet heard all that Nelly knew. Resuming, therefore, his leading questions, and addressing himself to Nelly's foibles, he said, after a pause: "Well, Nelly, ye tell thae stories extraordinar' weel. I feel like as it was a dreip o' cauld watter rinnin' doon a' my back—jist as if I was staunnin' under the pump when ye gie yer chickens a drink! But somehow, Nelly, I hae a kin' o' suspecion that ye ken mair yet, that naebody else kens; an' I'll no be satisfied till I hae it

oot wi' ye, for it's no every day a body meets wi' the likes o' you at the story tellin'."

"Hoot, Captain," replied Nelly, "ye're an awfu' man at the speerin'; but ye see, Captain, there's a wheen things that it's no lawfu' to speak o'; an' thae's jist the kin' o' things that I ken a wee bit o', farder, aboot Elspie MacGregor."

"I thocht that," said the Captain, "but ye ken fine that what ye tell is safe wi' me, for I'll never let on I heered it."

Nelly now turned again to the door behind her, and then, rising from her seat, she said :

"I maun hae a luik doon the ro'd to see that nae-body's even comin' oor way !" I rose too and went out with her to the door. The day had now settled into a lovely afternoon ; and there was a long vista of a winding gravel path which led through woods towards the castle. It was perfectly solitary. The air was full of crows going to, and returning from, their nests in their busy work of feeding the sitting wives. The copses were full of warbling, and the song of the skylark was ringing from the blue. Nelly was satisfied by her reconnaissance, and, returning to the room, she drew her stool still nearer to the Captain's, then leaning her elbow on her knees

and supporting her chin upon her hands, she began her further narrative.

“Weel, ye see, Captain, my faither an’ mither cam’ themselves frae the heid watters o’ Clyde; an’ I hae frien’s there to this day. Ane o’ my faither’s frien’s was a shepherd, o’ the name o’ Davie Armstrong, that lived in a verra lonesome cottage in the muirs o’ that kintray. He had chairge o’ a big hirsle* o’ sheep on a lairge fairm; an’ whiles he cam’ ower here wi’ a flock o’ wedders for the market at Carlisle. Weel, it was him that tell’t my faither what I’m noo gaun to tell you. Jist a few days efter the time that Elspie fled awa’—he didna mind the exact day,—there cam’ on some wild weather on thae muirs. On ane o’ thae days there was an awfu’ wunn’ an’ blashes o’ rain that garred a’ the burns come doon in flood. Davie was much taen up a’ that day wi’ his sheep, an’ especially wi’ the lambs, to see that nane o’ them had gotten intill heuchs an’ glens whaur they wad be droont; an’ it was late an’ dark or ever he got hame. Weel, his wife,—a raal dacent wumman wi’ twa weans—had gotten ready for her gudeman some fine het parritch, an’ a fine bowl o’ potatoes. The weans had been

* A definite portion of the stock.

pitten intill their bed. An' jist efter Davie had cam' in, an' cheenged a wee thing o' his claes—for he was mair like a drookit hen than a body—they had sat doon to their meat, whan they heer'd a kin' o' rap at the door. 'What can that be, Davie?' said the wife, a wee feared-like. 'Hoot, wumman,' says Davie, 'it's jist the door rattlin' wi' the storm.' Then cam' anither rap that couldna be mista'en, an' Davie rose, sayin' till his wife, 'Wha in a' the warld can be oot on this lone muir in sic a nicht as this?' Weel, Davie lifted the latch, and opened the door; an' jist as he pu'ed it till him, there cam' the awfu'est flash o' lightnin' that ever he had seen. It was pitch dark an' the rain draps were pourin' aff the roof, shinin' in the licht o' the bit lamp he had in his haun'. But there was nae need to peer into the dark, for the flash o' lightnin' lichtet up a tall wumman, mair drookit than he had been himsel', staunnin' richt under the lintel o' the door to get a wee bit oot o' the drivin' rain. 'Will ye gie me a nicht's shelter?' said she to Davie in a raal douce voice, an' haudin' her plaid under her chin no to let the watter rin a' doon her back. She was sic a gran' like wumman that Davie was maist dumfoondered, an' thocht she was a kin' o' leddy. So he flings

open the door an' says, 'That will I, mem, ye're welcome, for it's an awfu' nicht!' 'Oh!' says the wumman, 'it's kind o' ye; but ye're no to ca' me "mem." I'm a kintray wumman, like yer ain wife that I see there.' Wi' that, she steppit in an' lows'd the plaid aff o' her heid. 'Man,' said Davie to my faither, 'ye should hae seen the hair that fell oot! It was that black, that the verra nicht,—even yon nicht,—was licht beside it, an' it fell doon maist till her knees, an' she was a heich wumman. 'Step ben,' says I, 'ye'll find the wife, an' we had jist sat doon till a wee bit supper, an' we're glad to see ye join us!' The wife noo steppit furrit, an' asket the wumman to set hersel doon, an' gied her a plate o' het parritch wi' milk. Jist then the wumman spied the weans that were no far aff i' the bed. She loupet up, ran to the side o' the bed, an' stuid as straicht as a rash* glowerin' doon at the weans. Then she crossed her hauns afore her, an' luiket up, for a' the warld as gin she had been praying; an' syne she luikit doon again an' said in as sweet a voice as ever ye heard, 'The wee lambs!' an' we could see she was greetin'; but she goupit her sorrow doon, an' sair was it till her to do it, we could see that. An'

* A rush.

wi' that she turned roond an' sat hersel' doon whare the wife had pitten her at the first, an' she took her meat wi' us an' cracket that couthie for a' her big gran' luiks, that we baith took a gran' conceat o' her; but neither o' us daured to ax her whaurever she cam' frae, or was gaun till ower thae muirs in sic a nicht; for ye wad jist hae thocht she was a queen, she was that gran' like—an' she put by ony wee speerin's we did mak, jist as if she had never heard them. Neist the wife was obleeged to tell her that we had nae bed to gie her, but that the gude-man wad gie some raal clean strae that he had for the kye, in a wee ben. Wi' that I gaed to the ben an' brocht oot a gran' armfu' o' clean strae. I spread it oot in ae corner o' the room, for ye see we had but the ane to oorsels an' the weans. 'Thank ye kindly,' said the wumman, 'mony's the nicht I hae spent in my ain kintray, on a harder bed nor that. May the Lord bless an' keep ye baith for the kindness ye hae shown to me this nicht;' an' wi' that she lay doon; an' the lamp was pit oot; an' we a' sleepit soond, tho' the storm was roarin' awfu' on the ootside. Weel, at the first glint o' licht that cam' in the mornin', my gudewife lookit oot to see hoo the wumman was, an' seed that she was gaen,

—her corner was empy!’ An’ noo,” said Nelly, coming close up to the Captain and almost whispering as though she was afraid to speak what she was about to say, “Davie threepit a’ his days that the strae that the wumman had lain on was a’ burnt up, an’ naething o’ it was left, but a wheen white ashes; an’ Davie aye said that if there had been any low or smoke i’ the nicht he maun hae waukened, for he was a licht sleeper. ‘It was nae earthly fire that burnt yon strae,’ said Davie, when he tell’t my faither o’ that awful nicht.

“It’s gruesome, Captain, to think o’,” added Nelly; “but I’m tellin’ ye what Davie Armstrong aye said to his dyin’ day; an’ he’s been deid an’ buriet noo lang syne.” Nelly now composed herself in an attitude which expressed the complete exhaustion of her subject; and, after a pause, she nodded to the Captain, and, taking a metaphor from her own hens, she said emphatically, “Noo, my crap’s empy!”

The Captain, after many laudatory remarks addressed to Nelly, rose; and we two, picking up our salmon which had been hanging on a bush, walked down the path to the castle. Deeply interested as I had been by Nelly’s story, I came away less satisfied than the Captain, who had evidently heard be-

fore some outlines of the events narrated. What troubled me was a discrepancy between dim recollections of the name I had once heard given to the nurse, and the name assigned to her by Nelly. I could not recall the name I had heard, but I was quite certain it was not Elspie. Both ears and eyes were concerned in my dim recollection. Not only did the name "Elspie" fail to correspond with the rhythm of the name as I remembered it; but I recollected also having seen it written, and the length of it was as different to the eye as the sound of it to the ear.

An old smoking-room in the castle had held, ranged upon its walls when I was a child, a series of very rough portraits; and among them was one which I was told represented the nurse. They had all been destroyed by a fire when I was still very young. I had a very dim recollection of the face; but I did recollect a name written in queer, long letters near the lower edge of the frame: this name also, I was quite sure, could not have represented "Elspie." But I racked my brain to no purpose in trying to recall the syllables; so I gave it up, and thought no more about it.

As soon as we reached the front door, the Captain

suddenly broke out with the "War Cry of Badenoch." As nobody in the castle except my father had ever heard that fiendish yell, every room in the castle that had an inmate had its window represented by a protruded head and face expressive of curiosity and alarm. But the most extraordinary effect was upon the crows. They all rose from their nests in the greatest alarm, just as if a gun had been fired underneath their trees. Never was there such a loud and tumultuous flapping of wings in the rookery of Strathgled. The air was black with the poor birds passing and repassing overhead to reconnoitre and see what new enemy had appeared near their usually peaceful homes. My father's head soon appeared at a window near his workshop shouting, "Oh, you rascally Captain, I heard your skirl coming up the glen hours ago ; but I'll forgive you if you have brought a good fresh fish for dinner, with the curd in it. Tell the cook to dress it at once."

The Captain lived with us nearly a month, during which he and I were inseparable companions in all out-of-door occupations. I was captivated by his unfailing cheerfulness and good humour, by his anecdotes of Indian life, as well as by his sage counsels on all subjects of practical conduct. Not less was

I amused by his strange peculiarities. He had some nickname for everybody he knew; generally some form of word taken from Highland or Lowland provincialisms indifferently. Thus, he was very fond of Shakespeare and often quoted him, but always under the name of "Wullum" (William). His sticks were peculiar—rather of the bludgeon type—but always of some tree growing on some celebrated site which he had visited in his travels. To each stick he gave a personal name derived from any historical character associated with the spot. Thus, a bludgeon cut from the Coliseum at Rome, was always respectfully spoken of as Titus. Another from the olives near Athens had the name of Plato. Another cut near the Great Falls was called Niagara.

But although constantly using provincialisms both in pronunciation and in structure, when not using them, but speaking English, he was not only a strict grammarian but he had a special antipathy to the slipshod colloquialisms which are very common. "Who are you speaking of?" I used sometimes to say, as others do. But the bad grammar was invariably followed by a voice of thunder, "Whom are you speaking of? I suppose you mean," adding sometimes in the broadest Scotch, "that's fulthy

English indeed ! Let me never hear ye say that again ! ”

Among indifferent company he became strangely stiff and formal in his manners, speaking always the most accurate grammar, and delighting to make his interlocutors feel when they had transgressed.

Another peculiarity was a strange habit of regulating his own movements by a variety of anniversary dates ; and to my great sorrow, this habit brought his visit to an end on the 18th June, the date of the battle of Waterloo, beyond which nothing could induce him to prolong it. We parted, agreeing to correspond regularly.

I must now ask my readers to pass with me over the long period of nearly thirty years, during which I have nothing to record which touches the special subject of this narrative. The Captain returned to India, and had there attained a high position in the service of that great company which founded, and long managed our Indian Empire. My father had died ; and I had succeeded him, leading very much the same country life—planting, draining, and inclosing land, so that cultivation gradually climbed up the slopes of the neighbouring hills.

The whole elder generation, and even a large pro-

portion of those who were in middle life at the time of my past narrative, had passed away. Old Nelly had long been gathered to her fathers; although she had continued to feed and to rear our chickens, and to entertain the neighbours with her old stories, till she was nearly ninety years of age.

About the period I have indicated, I one day received a letter from "the Captain," long since risen to the rank of Lieut.-Colonel, informing me that, by the unforeseen death, in rapid succession, of several intervening heirs, he had become proprietor of a considerable estate in the Western Highlands, the name of which was Achnashee; and that he meant soon to return home to spend the remainder of his days in retirement, now much needed from the long continued effects of an Indian climate upon almost every European constitution.

He "trysted me," as he called it, to meet him by paying him a visit as soon as he should be settled at his new home. It was, however, more than a year before I could arrange for the "tryst": not till the month of August in the year following that in which he had taken possession. I found the Colonel greatly changed in the outward man, but hardly changed at all in any of his old ways. He now grew

a profuse beard, which still more effectually concealed his want of chin, and which, under his expressive upper features, and under a high-domed head, almost bald, with long but scanty grey hair still fringing its lower regions, gave additional dignity to his aspect.

In talk he was as young as ever; full of his old jokes, which were, indeed, perennial with him, and of which he never seemed to tire. He asked me many questions about his old friends at Strathgled, including the workmen and tenants whose cottages or houses we had visited together. Not realising the lapse of time in the freshness of his memory, and looking across the monotony of his Indian life, he always seemed surprised as, one after another, he heard that all his older friends were gone. "Hech surse!" he used to exclaim, "Man wants but little here below, nor wants that little long," a favourite quotation with him on many occasions. I had to remind him that a period of thirty years makes, as a rule, a clean sweep of all who were elderly when it began, a very large sweep of those who were middle-aged, and leaves but a moderate percentage, even of those who were young.

“It’s ower true,” said the Colonel in one of his low but deepest intonations.

The Colonel’s new home was in a beautiful country. The house was near the mouth of a fine Highland glen which ran up some seven miles into the mountains from an arm of the sea, near the shore of which the house was built. The slopes were steep without being precipitous, and they were clothed with that natural wild wood of birch, ash, alder, and hazel, of which there are so few remains in the Highlands. There is no planting like that of nature; the variety of outline in the edging of the natural woods, the lines which run up the courses of the little torrents, and the vacant spaces at irregular intervals,—all of which show the same feathery margins, with lanes, alleys, and embayments among the surrounding thickets—all these are invariably missed in artificial planting. A fine fresh-water lake occupied the bed of the glen for some three miles. Out of this lake there flowed an exquisite little river, winding through fields of pasture, “now rushing in foamy waterbrooks, now loitering in glassy pool.” Both in the river and in the lake, there was excellent salmon and sea-trout fishing. The Colonel, who had become somewhat frail in his

legs, preferred fishing in the lake from a boat; and often returned with splendid baskets. Some fortnight or so had passed of my visit to my old friend, when one day he said to me, "Now, Laird, I can't go with you; but if you would like, for a change, to have some moor-loch fishing, they tell me that on this estate, about seven miles down the loch, there are some small lochans with very fine trout. If you would like to fish them, I'll give you a dog-cart, with my keeper, David Johnston, and by starting early you can have the whole day on the hills and be back to dinner."

I jumped at this proposal; and accordingly my little expedition was arranged for the following morning. Taking a light rod, light tackle, and suitable flies, I was off early on a lovely morning in the first days of August. The drive lay at first along the margin of the sea loch, and then turned off into a parallel valley which was wild and comparatively little wooded. I had already discovered that the keeper David Johnston, who was a native of Fife, was a good deal of a character, and was inspired just like my early friend, Nelly Leggy, with a great dislike of the Gaelic-speaking population. He was a man, however, of unusually refined manners for

his class, and never spoke otherwise than courteously when he addressed the natives. His observations were not the less keen and fluent when they were out of hearing. Soon after we had turned off the shore road into the other valley, we came to a gate with a cottage beside it. David gave a shout, which was the accustomed signal to the inmates who had charge of the gate that it was to be opened. There was no reply and no movement. The shout had to be repeated not once but several times before a woman appeared, tying on a very dirty apron and moving very slowly through rather an abundant midden which lay near the door, and spread itself with but little constraint in front of it. When she had opened the gate with extreme slowness, and we had passed, David turned to me and said: "Did ever ye see siccan a cockiebendie o' a cratur? She maun hae heard me fine frae the first; but they're that lazy, they wunna steer as lang as they can help it; an' did ye no see the midden, a' rinnin' about the verra doorstep, when ane o' thae weemen or even a laddie wi' a besom wad clean it aff, an' a wee bit liftin' o' the stanes wad keep it frae seepin'* like yon."

* Soaking.

“ Well, David,” I replied, “ the Highlanders have their faults ; but do you not think that you Lowland folks have some faults, just to keep them company ? ”

“ Oo’, I’s e warrant ! ” said David shortly, with that ready confession of general sinfulness which we all make, and with the same readiness to deny every peccadillo in particular. It closed David’s mouth, however, for some distance, although we passed some people and some houses which lent themselves to observation. But when we came near a small patch of arable land where some men and women were by way of digging potatoes, David could stand it no longer. “ Jist look at the cratur’s,” he said, “ do ye see hoo the tae half o’ them are staunnin’ wi’ their haun’s i’ their pockets, an’ hoo the tither half are haun’lin’ the graip jist as if it burnt their fingers ? And then, Gude sakes ! wull ye see to their aits !—there’s mair weeds nor corn,—an’ the crap will be maistly a crap o’ thae yellow gowans.* Well, sir, I can tell ye this : oor new Laird, that’s your friend the Colonel, he has gied me a bit grund for my ain ’taties ;—oo ! it’s no the quarter o’ an acre,—an,’ as I didna need it a’ for the ’taties, I thocht I wad jist pit in something else ; so I diggit a wee corner o’ it

* Daisies.

wi' a spade, like 18 inches deep ;—an' I'll assure ye, sir, that I had mair fine aits* aff that wee bit than thae cratur's will hae aff twa o' their acres, an' mair. An' forby that, when the aits was aff, early in the season, I had time to pit in some vegetables that cam' on fine afore the end o' the year—an' they cam' in handy for the coo i' the winter."

"Ye're quite right, David," I said ; "the cultivation of small crofts in the Hielands is generally very bad ; and your spade cultivation would beat it hollow. But you must mind, you come from the low country, and you have seen the new ways which the Lairds and the large farmers brought in. ' But it's not so long, David, since all the folks in the low country were just as behindhand as these Highlanders are now. A hundred years ago the low country was just as full of them you call 'puir cratur's' as the Highlands are till this day ; and very often there was famine in the land when an extra bad season came."

"Weel," said David, "I didna ken that ; but it wad tak' a heap o' Lairds, an' a heap o' big fairmers to teach thae bodies onything o' the kin'." By this time we had passed out of sight of the 'tatie diggers,

* Oats.

and of the crop of yellow gowans, and David's tongue again became silent. Presently we came to a deep ravine with a brawling stream in it, feathered, in all its sudden banks, with birch trees and the lovely rowan, laden with berries just beginning to assume the rich scarlet of their perfect ripeness. The ravine was crossed by a curious and very narrow stone bridge, which was twisted in the middle so as to present a most undesirable winding, considering the very low parapet which alone separated us from a precipice over which the stream fell in a foaming cascade. David informed me that it bore the name of the "Roman Bridge"—a curious testimony to the tradition which long attributed all works of unknown origin to the Romans, although nothing could be more absolutely different from anything like Roman work. On crossing the bridge, I found we were close to a "clachan"*—a cluster of thatched cottages and outhouses after the approved manner of a Highland crofting township. The cottages were built at all angles to the slope of the hill; some across the declivity, some down it, and some obliquely. There were no built chimneys; and I observed that the smoke was curling in most cases

* Village.

out of some orifice in the middle of the roof. Through the clachan a grassy path struck off up the hill, being evidently a peat road, giving access to the mosses and muirs upon the upper levels of the country. David drove at once into the clachan, unyoked his horse, and took it into a rough shelter which could hardly be called a stable, where a little boy took charge of it, and engaged to give it a feed of hay. David, now pointing to the winding path, said to me: "That's oor ro'd ; an' a gey steep ro'd it is, but it's dry ; an' it'll be an' 'oor's walking till we are at the first o' the muir-lochs."

I was delighted with the walk and the scenery. Our way led up a hill, grassy, but also heathery in parts, till at the top of it we saw below us a deep hollow, and in front another hill wholly different in aspect. It was rough and precipitous, apparently of granite. In the hollow lay a small lake, which was the first of a series we met with in the course of the day. Over each ridge in succession and under each opposing front, lay always some one or two little lochs, sometimes a chain of them, either opening into each other or separated only by little distances of heathy or rocky knolls. This was entirely new hill scenery to me. In the Southern or Border Highlands

the hills are large, rounded, and not divided into sharp or narrow ridges. There are a few mountain lakes in the southern hills ; but they are large and lie in larger and wider depressions. This multitude of little lakelets or “lochans,” as they are locally called, was caused by hill forms of a totally different character,—as if it were by the irregular tumblings in, and unequal subsidences, of the earth’s crust. The fishing was delightful of its kind. Each little loch seemed to have a breed of trout peculiar to itself. I at once noticed the extraordinary difference between them, even when—as was often the case—they were close together. There was a like difference in the aspect of each loch. Some were shadowed by little precipices, and apparently deep, with rocky edges : some were in peaty and heathery but shallow hollows where they glittered in the sun and were ruffled by every breeze ; some had lovely little bays of white or reddish sand or gravel ; whilst in others the tall stalks of old heather drooped into the water from steep little banks of moss. Some were starred with the most beautiful beds of water lily, carpeted with enormous leaves, and radiant with its incomparable flowers ; some had beds of reeds only at one end, and none elsewhere,

whilst in all of them the little rings of rising trout, when the breezes failed, showed them to be alive with fish. Trout, either silvery with black spots or yellow with red spots, or so silvery all over as to be almost like sea trout, soon filled and more than filled my basket. The utter solitude of those lovely moors and rock hollows, broken only by the bleat of a sheep; the sweetness of the air laden with the fragrance of the bog myrtle and of the heather in full bloom; the excellence and the novelty of the sport; all combined to make it a delightful day. When it was getting well on in the afternoon, and we had sat down to rest, I said to David: "Now, is there any good loch within easy reach that I could try before going home?" "Yes," he said; "there's a wee loch they ca' Loch na Shee, that has bonnie troot, but it's up ower yon hill heid," pointing to a very steep, rocky ridge above us—"an' a wee bit ayont it. It's the heichest o' a' oor lochs."

"I must see it," I said to David; and we started at once. On gaining the crest of the ridge, a new world seemed to open before me. I found it to be the summit level of a long tract of mountain, which ran parallel with the sea loch, and separated it from the shores of the open western ocean. I

call it open because there were wide openings which gave access to the broad Atlantic, and the pulse of its mighty swell could be seen and felt upon rocky shores and in a thousand bays and creeks which were protected from the direct action of its waves. But it was not "open" in the sense of presenting one unbroken horizon. Islands or islets of every size and form lay before me, separated by gleaming tracts of sea; whilst, on the furthest range of sight, the grand horizontal line of ocean was interrupted only by a few tracts of the faintest and purest blue, coming as it might seem from some islands of the blessed.

The mountains on which we stood sloped steeply down through some lower hills to the shores of this sea, which, though it was a calm day, was breaking in white foam on rocky promontories and on sunny bays. When this view burst upon me I stood transfixed, gazing as if I could not be satisfied with its beauty.

"The wee lochan," said David, "is no a quarter o' a mile farder on," pointing to a hollow a little beyond and below us. I then observed that the ridge on which I stood was divided into two parallel lines by a cleft which shallowed gradually towards our

right hand, until it ended in a union of the two about a mile off. The farthest division of the ridge ended abruptly in a steep face immediately in front of our position, leaving its companion ridge on which we stood to pursue its course to the southwest. Down the long hollow trickled a little stream until it fell into a deep, cup-like depression just under the sudden termination of one of its containing walls. On advancing to our own side of this depression, the little lake was opened up, lying ensconced between the ridges, and sending out its surplus waters through a small stream which suddenly had to tumble over a precipitous bank in a series of continuous waterfalls. The opposite bank was a steep "scaur" of broken and fallen rock, with here and there a few stunted bushes of birch, and, close to the edge of the water, some bushes of the "saugh" or mountain willow. A rich bed of water lilies lay along that shore, whilst the shore next to us was clear and rocky. The pasture of the ridge on which we stood was strangely green and rich, considering its elevation, and contrasted strongly with the rough heather and rocks of the opposite bank. I noticed, too, that the pasture was disposed in ring-shaped spaces, the centre of which was occupied by young

and very beautiful tufts of heather in full bloom. Presently I noticed farther that on this fine pasture and down the slope towards the little stream the turf was marked with the almost vanished remains of small circular and oblong enclosures, as if of ancient huts. Some of these were mere superficial markings affecting only the colour of the grass; others were more distinct in slight elevations of the turf. All of them suggested some form of human habitation, whilst the smallness of the enclosed area told that this habitation could have been nothing but sleeping places, some rude protection from the weather. Not caring to fish any more myself, and wishing to have some quiet minutes alone in this enchanting spot, with its vast prospect in the distance and its traces at my feet of some phase of human life long passed away, I sent David down the steep bank to get a few specimens of the trout; and, sitting on the top of the bank, I let my eye wander from an horizon of immeasurable space to the tiny dimples made by the rising fish in the lake below me.

Then suddenly it burst upon me what the human interest was which added such pathos and intensity to the charms of nature. I was sitting within the area of an old "shieling," which represented all

that existed, in the rural life of the middle ages, of rustic poetry and peace. It existed everywhere; but it survived longest in the Highlands. Cattle, with only a very few sheep and some goats, were the whole stock of the people. Wolves and foxes infested the mountains, and all domestic animals had to be herded and protected. Only during some two months of midsummer could this be done on the higher hills, which, for at least nine months in the year, were thus left desolate, their immense surfaces of forage useless to man. But in those two months there was an exodus to the uplands, where often there were little tracts of pasture especially rich in milk and meat-producing grasses. There, among knolls dry from natural drainage, the whole village population, male and female, old and young, migrated from the hovels and from the patches of scanty corn, to enjoy the midsummer with their cattle on the hills. The life was for the most part an out-door life; but sleeping shelters at least for the women and children were a necessity, and every little enclosure I saw around me was a relic of that far-off time when all the banks and braes around me rang with the singing of mothers and the joyous shouts of the bairns, while all the beasts browsed around.

It was the custom of a poor and ignorant and wasteful time when the resources of the country were wholly undeveloped and when years of famine and distress were common. But, like other half-civilised conditions, it had some incidents which were happy and many which were picturesque. I knew that the same custom had prevailed in my own southern hills, only at a remoter time; but I gazed with a curious interest on the traces of its survival down to a date which was evidently much more recent.

“David,” I said, on my companion’s return to me with a few lovely trout, “how on earth can the trout here have ever got into this loch, or, indeed, into any of the others? They can’t have come up the burns, for they are all waterfalls.”

“’Deed, sir,” said David, “mony’s the time I hae wondered at that; I haena a notion! Some says it was the auld monks; but that maun be nonsense. Some says it was what they ca’ the fairies; but I never seed a fairy in my life, an’ I dinna believe in them. But div ye ken, sir, that this loch is ca’ed in Gaelic the ‘Fairies’ Loch’? It’s a’ the clavers o’ thae Hielanders! they’re jist fu’ o’ a’ that kin’ o’ nonsense.”

“Who told you that?” I asked.

“Oo,” said David, “there’s a heap o’ auld folks, an’ some young anes as should ken better, that I’ve heard speaking aboot it. Thae green rings ye see in the grass is whaur they say the fairies dance at nicht. But I never gie ony heed to sic clash; it’s no worth a body’s while.”

“David,” I said, looking at my watch, “it’s time we were down the hill; let us be off.”

It does not take long to run down hill some 1,500 feet; but after a long day’s work it tries the knees, and when we reached the clachan I confess I was both hot and tired.

“David, do you think I can get a drink of milk at any of these cottages?” I asked.

“Fine!” was the curt reply, and he pointed to the largest and nearest of the cottages that were smoking, as the one to go to. The sound of my footsteps as I reached the door aroused a tremendous barking of dogs from the inside, so that no knock could be heard. But doors in the Highlands are lightly barred. I therefore lifted the latch and stepped into the interior. I was instantly beset by some four or five collie dogs, who ran at my legs with bristling manes, stiffened tails, and a pandemonium of angry barks and growls. I knew by experience that

under such circumstances the only thing to do is to stand still, and to maintain as best one can an attitude of perfect indifference and composure. Presently I was somewhat relieved to see and hear a fat young woman shouting to the dogs from the other side of the interior, in tones and words of command and condemnation. "Troosh! troosh!" I heard repeated many times, together with words less articulate to my Lowland ear, but equally capable of expressing indignation if not execration. The names, too, of the rebellious dogs seemed to be represented by certain of the sounds: "Troosh, Botich!" "Bousdhu, troosh!" but as the angry animals continued to surge round my legs with increasing excitement and fury, I was still further relieved to see the fat lassie seize one of the wooden rollers used for the spreading out of the dough or oatmeal into the form of cakes. With this formidable weapon she advanced upon her rebellious subjects, and I had soon the infinite satisfaction of seeing and hearing it brought down in well-delivered blows on the heads and backs of "Botich," "Bousdhu," and several others of their kindred. Under this heavy fire they began to waver, and were finally routed, taking refuge under the box beds which are, or were, the

universal sleeping-places in cottages. Under these, through apparently impossible spaces and apertures, they crept out of sight, and then, turning round, lay with noses protruded on the floor still pointing to their enemy, growling and occasionally exposing to view the most beautiful and formidable arrays of teeth.

When this deliverance had been finally effected I had time to look before me and around me. I found that I had entered a cottage of the oldest type, consisting of one room, with the fire burning in the middle of the floor, and the smoke curling up in blue clouds with, on the whole, wonderful precision to a circular aperture in the roof. The floor seemed to be of baked, hardened clay or soil, and, though uneven, presented a dry and not unpleasant surface. The beams and rafters which supported the roof were black and polished by the smoke. On a few lower beams of wood there hung some legs and ribs of salted braxy* mutton and a few kippered herrings. At the farther side there was a wooden rack for plates and dishes of common pottery, and in front of it a rude table or dresser, at which the fat girl

* A disease of sheep common in the Highlands, which does not injuriously affect the meat.

had been standing washing dishes, when my intrusion and the dogs had interrupted her. On the other side of the central fire I could see at intervals through the wreaths of smoke which rose from some fresh peat recently put on, that there was an older woman sitting in a rough wooden chair, who seemed from her attitude to be ill or feeble. The fat girl, now standing triumphant over the dogs, had a pleasing expression of face, and, smiling an inarticulate welcome, seemed to await my behests. Offering to shake hands with her, to which she responded very shyly, I said: "Can you give me a drink of milk?" The sound of my voice, somewhat loud and distinct, in order to make my English as clear as possible to a Gaelic-speaking woman, seemed to reach the dogs in their retreat before it reached their mistress's ear, and was instantly answered by a renewed outburst of growls and half-suppressed barks; moreover, the gnashing teeth which gleamed from under the nearest box bed were as beautiful as they were threatening.

"Troosh!" cried the fat girl again in the most screaming voice, "Troosh!" and with that she made a dash with the wooden roller at the most inhospitable of the noses which surrounded us. The nose, however, was so quickly and so completely with-

drawn into inaccessible recesses, that the girl's assault was ineffectual. Returning to me with a very courteous little curtsey she said, "Cha'n'eil English agam,"—words to which I had learnt to attach the meaning "I have no English,"—adding some other words which were quite unintelligible to me, but which were interpreted by gestures indicating that her elder companion beside the fire would be able to understand me.

To get at this more learned lady it was necessary to reconnoitre. I could not walk straight through the fire to reach her on the other side; to attempt to jump over it would hardly be dignified or respectable, and I was uncertain whether it might not cost another explosion of canine wrath more justifiable than the last, and possibly more difficult to suppress.

Round one side of the fire were certain stools and settles which impeded access on that flank; and I soon perceived that in order to reach the only English-speaking person in the cottage, I must make something of a circuit round the other end of the room and then turn back towards her chair. Proceeding with this necessary manœuvre, I had soon accomplished a sufficient section of the orbit round the centre of my attraction to be able to see the elder

woman free from the volumes of peat-reek which had obscured her before. I found myself the object of a steady gaze out of eyes which seemed to express great astonishment, some alarm, and at the same time something of a curious wistfulness which might be the courteousness due to a hospitable reception. One circumstance about her gaze at once attracted my attention, and that was, that it travelled from my head to my feet, and mounted again from my feet to my head, and repeated this movement of elevation and depression with every step I took. On my approaching close to her chair, she rose from it slowly, supporting herself on a shepherd's staff with a wonderful crozier-like crook at the top. Then, making a very slight curtsey, she raised the hollow of her hand to her ear and leaned her head sideways to my face, saying as she did so, "What's your wull, sir?"

Knowing the importance of slowness and great distinctness in speaking English to Highlanders who very seldom hear it, I replied in that manner: "My gudewife, I have been fishing on your hill all day, and I am a little thirsty: would you be so kind as to give me a drink of milk?"

In speaking these words I noticed that each syl-

lable as it reached her ear, seemed to strike her like a pistol shot. A very slight and involuntary start accompanied her reception of the sound. When the last of them had been spoken she let her hand fall slowly by her side, saying as she did so, "Ye'll get that," in a tone which seemed to add plainer than any speech, "and anything else that I can gie ye!"

She then sat down and motioned to me to do the same on a wooden stool which was beside her. A few Gaelic words, undistinguishable to my ears as articulate sounds at all, sent the fat girl at once to the little store of crockery which stood above the dresser, whence I saw her take down a good-sized earthenware jug of apparently better quality than the rest, and then open and disappear through a door which I had not before observed. The opening of it, however, speedily revealed its function, which was, to constitute the only separation between the dwelling room of the family and the dwelling room of the cows. The odours and the breath of kine seemed to roll in and roll out again in the wreath of smoke. Meantime the woman turned to me with a kindly and almost confidential manner; and I at once saw that she was familiar with English, or rather with Scotch-English, speaking it only with

a very pleasing accent and intonation derived from Gaelic.

“An’ ye hae been ower oor hull,” she said, holding up her hand to her ear to catch my reply.

“Yes, gudewife,” I said; “and a bonnie hill it is.”

“Ye may weel say that,” she replied, “there’s no a corner o’ it that I dinna ken; an’ a bonnier hull there is no’ in a’ the country side. An’ ye wad see oor wee lochans?”

“Yes,” I said, “and fished a number of them.”

“An’ did ye see the ane at the very tap?” asked the woman.

“Indeed I did,” I answered; “I suppose you mean the lochan that they call the Fairies’ Loch.”

“Wha tell’t ye that?” asked the old woman.

“Oh,” I said, “it was only the Laird’s keeper, David Johnson; but he told me the name as a kind of joke, for he was laughing about it.”

“Oo!” said the woman, with an animation that was tinged with anger, “thae low-kintray folk, they’re aye laughing at what they dinna understand. They think they ken a’ things i’ this warld an’ i’ the nuxt; an’ they believe in naething that they canna grip an’ haunle. But maybe,” she added in

a tone of some contempt, "there's jist a wee wheen o' things that they dinna ken, an' that it'll ne'er be gien them to see."

"But have you seen any of these things yourself, gudewife?" I asked in a tone of sympathy.

"Me seen them?" echoed the woman in a tone of surprise at such a question, "hae I no?"

At this moment the fat lassie reappeared with her jug full of the richest warm milk, fresh from the cow, and foaming over the lip of the jug. A mug or beaker of the same pattern and manufacture was handed to me by the girl; and never did I enjoy such a refreshing drink of milk. In returning the mug to the girl, I noticed a small, medallion-like space in the external pattern, with apparently some half faded letters in gilding, much rubbed off by cleaning. Rising it again so as to catch what light there was, I traced with some difficulty letters which seemed to form the word "ISHABEL."

In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, the doors of memory were opened; and out of those mysterious halls and chambers of which St. Augustine speaks, where the images of the past lie dormant, but not destroyed, there rose before me one of the dimmest recollections of my childhood.

“ISHABEL,”—that was the very name which in earlier years I had so often and so vainly endeavoured to recall; that was the very name, with all its rhythm and its letters, which had haunted me when I heard Nelly Leggy call my father’s nurse by the name of Elspie. That was the phantom word which had so long dwelt vaguely in my mind whenever I recalled the old picture which had been destroyed by fire.

Those faded gilt letters on the mug before me brought it all back again as vividly as if the intervening years had been erased. In another second I found myself going through a calculation in mental arithmetic. My father had died 30 years ago. He was 70 at his death. Therefore the date of his boyhood when he was 10 years of age, lay 90 years behind us. At that time, his nurse must have been at least 20 years of age, for she had been my grandmother’s maid before she became her child’s nurse. Ninety and 20 made 110 years. This calculation rapidly made, disconcerted me; and then it flashed upon me that Ishabel was evidently only a Gaelic form of Isabella, and was probably a name common in the Highlands. But was it possible that this woman was a daughter of Elspie MacGregor, of

whose memory my own childhood had been so full? All this passed through my mind with a rush.

“Was that your mother’s name?” I asked my hostess, holding up the mug and pointing to the letters to explain my meaning.

“My mither’s name?” replied the woman, with a solemn shake of the head, “och no! it’s my ain name; an’ has been these mair nor a hunder years gane by! An’ I hae nae need to ask *your* name,” she added in a voice trembling with emotion. Then, laying a hand on each of my shoulders, and gazing into my face with a yearning look of a mother to a recovered child, she said in solemn tones: “Ye’re Douglas of Strathgled!”

Astonishment and bewilderment struck me for a moment dumb. Then recovering, I said: “Gudewife, how can you possibly know me? I have never been in this country before; and if you are the Elspie MacGregor I heard of when I was a child, you must have left that country long before I was born.”

“How did I ken ye?” said Ishabel, repeating my question in a tone akin to scorn. “Did I no’ ken ye when ye cam ower the door? Did I no’ ken your build? Did I no ken the way your head is set upon

your shouthers ? Did I no' ken your very step ? An' abune a did I no' ken your voice when ye asked the drink o' mulk ? It was as if my auld maister your grandfaither had risen frae the grave. An' forby a' that, did I no' hae a dream a few nights gane by, that tell't me ye were comin', an' that my auld een wad see the bairn o' him that was my bairn, afore they've closed on this life ? Did I say it was a dream, Strathgled ? Och ! och ! no, it was na that. For I was wide awake as I'm awake noo. It was nae dream ; but jist that ye cam' into my thochts, and I had an eerie feelin' that ye were near—a feelin' that has been given to me twa or three times in byegane years, when they were comin' that had been lang awa'." Saying this, she poured out on me all the forms of blessing that the Old Testament could supply, during which I had a moment to seek for any signs of great age, which had escaped me at first ; and these signs were not wanting in the hands and arms which were stretched out towards me. They were skeletons, and the skin was so transparent that every vein was seen as blue as the distant mountains, whilst every bone and tendon made its presence visible. Her eyes were dark and vivacious, but with the white ring round the iris, which, however, I knew

was not uncommon at a comparatively early age. A few locks of hair, as white as the driven snow, escaped down the side of her face and her neck, from under the "mutch" cap she wore. This was all that remained of the raven tresses which Nelly Leggy had so graphically described to the Colonel and myself, as the dream of her childhood some half century before that again. When Ishabel had poured out her very soul in all the benedictions of the patriarchs and prophets she leaned back in her chair and once more eyed me, from head to foot, with a look of intense interest and affection. Deeply moved, both by the old woman's warm-heartedness and by the wonder and mystery of our encounter, I said, "Well, Ishabel, it was indeed a happy chance that brought me here this evening."

"A happy chance!" interrupted Ishabel with vehemence, "Och, och, Strathgled! dinna use siccan a word as that. It was God's wull! an' it was Hum that brocht ye, an' nane ither! an did He no' send me a sign as I hae been tellin' ye?"

"I do not doubt that, Ishabel," I resumed, "only that so far as my own knowledge and intentions went, this finding of Ishabel still in life is to me like meeting someone risen from the dead."

“Och! och!” replied the old woman, “but I am thankful this day.”

“Well, Ishabel, it’s getting late now, and my old friend your new Laird will be waiting for me, and you know I have seven miles to get to Achnashee; but it will not be long before I come back to see you, for I have much to say and much to ask.”

With that I rose, kissed the old woman’s hand in token of the only benediction I could give, and returned to David, who had yoked the horses to the dog-cart, and had waited, evidently with some impatience, for the termination of my drink of milk.

On the way home I was absent and distracted, and only asked David one question:

“Do you know the auld wife that lives in the cottage you sent me to for the milk?”

“I hae heerd tell o’ her,” said David, “but I hae never seen her. They say she’s a spae-wife; an nae-body kens hoo auld she is; a’body’s a wee fear’d o’ her!”

I was somewhat late for dinner; and, as one of the Colonel’s peculiarities was an almost morbid punctuality in all things, I found him just a little crusty, and speaking the best English, a sure sign with him of a dignified reserve. A full account,

however, of the fine basket of trout which I had brought home, and of their different qualities, soon restored his equanimity; and he began again to speak with familiar provincialisms interwoven.

When the servant had left the room, and we two were left to some dried figs and claret, I determined to tell him as best I could of the adventure I had met with and of the discovery I had made.

“Colonel,” I said, “do you remember our visit to old Nelly Leggy, thirty years ago, when first you came to Strathgled, in my boyhood?”

“Fine, that!” replied the Colonel.

“And do you remember,” I continued, “the long yarns the old woman told us about a Highland nurse who had fled from the castle some half century before that, when my father was not more than ten years old?”

“’Deed I do,” said the Colonel; “I mind especially the description old Nelly gave of the appearance of the nurse, and of her hair, and of the traces of her flight over the hills.”

“And do you remember that you seemed to have known something of that story before, and cross-questioned Nelly so as to draw her out?”

“Oh, yes,” said the Colonel, laughing, “I had heard

the story vaguely from an old tutor of your father's who had left Strathgled before you were born, and had told it to me in outline, but without Nelly's havers about the woman having been a witch."

"Well, Colonel," I continued, "would it astonish you if I had found some traces of that very Highland nurse on this same estate of your own?"

"Traces," said the Colonel, "what kind of traces do you mean? I suppose you will be telling me that you have found some cinders or ashes, where she had been lying, as Nelly told us her bed of straw was burnt—of course by the Deil—when she left a shepherd's cottage. Do you mind that, Laird?"

"Oh, don't be so ironical, Colonel," I replied, "I mind well enough the nonsense that was mixed up with Nelly's story; but I'll astonish you yet with the facts I have found out."

"What kind of facts, Laird?" said the Colonel.

"Well," I replied, "I'll not beat about the bush any longer. I'll simply tell you that I have found the woman, and that she is alive and well to this day, and moreover is one of your own tenants in the Clachan of Kilkiaran."

The Colonel now gazed upon me with a look of inquiry which plainly asked if I were mad or chaff-

ing. Settling it at last in his own mind he replied somewhat sharply :

“Come, come, Laird, I’m too old a bird to be caught by such chaff as that. What the devil do you mean?”

“I mean,” I said, “my dear Colonel, exactly what I have said. Elspie MacGregor, as perhaps you recollect she was called by old Nelly, is alive now and is in one of the crofts on your township of Kilkiaran. I found her out by pure accident; but from what she told me, I am as sure of what I am telling you as I am that I am talking to you now.”

“My dear boy,” said the Colonel, addressing me as he occasionally did, as he used to address me thirty years before, “just think for a moment what nonsense you are talking. It is 31 years since you and I heard the story from old Nelly : it was then a story more than half a century old, that makes at least 81 years, and the nurse must have been between 20 and 30 years of age at the time of her flight, for she was maid to your grandmother before she was nurse to her children ; so that the woman, if alive now, must be at the very least between 110 and 120 years old.”

“Well, Colonel,” I rejoined, “have you never heard of instances of such an age?”

“ Ah, bah ! ” said the Colonel, a phrase which was his usual retort when argument seemed useless.

“ Well, well, Colonel ! I have only two favours to ask of you : one is to lend me your dog-cart again to take me back to Kilkiaran Clachan to-morrow morning, and the second is, to give me another driver, and not your keeper, David.”

“ Certainly,” said the Colonel ; “ but what’s your objection to David ? ”

“ Oh,” I replied, “ he hates the Highlanders very nearly as much as you may remember Nelly Leggy hated them ; he is an uncongenial element in all I may have to do in getting the further information I desire. So do give me a native to drive the dog-cart and take charge of it.”

This being agreed upon, on the next day I reached the clachan about mid-day and found Ishabel extremely well and animated. She received me with open arms, and showered again all her blessings on my head.

“ Ishabel,” I said, “ ye’re looking fine this morning ; I’m so glad to see it ! ”

“ Oo ! ” replied the old woman with a smile of amusement and affection playing over her aged face, “ I’m just renewing my youth like the aigle ;

an' I'm thinkin' it's just wi' seein' you, Strathgled!"

"Well," I said rather thoughtlessly, "if you're so fond of us, why did you ever leave us?"

"That's a question," said the old woman, drawing herself up as straight as an arrow, and putting on an expression at once sorrowful, dignified, and severe, "that's a question that naebody, not even you, Strathgled, has ony right to ask o' me. I canna speak o' them that's gane. Them that ever did ull to me, or spak ull o' me, has been lang in the presence o' their Maker. I canna be much langer ahint them; an' ye ken the Scriptor that says that for every idle word we speak we'll hae to gie an accoont. It wad be naething but idle words o' me, if I were to tell what made me flee. But, Strathgled," she went on, with increased tenderness, but with also some increased severity, "ye surely canna think it was a sma' trouble that made me face your driech lonely hulls; that sent me in your kintray, for four days and four nichts tramping across them, an' they're mair like big puddings than hulls like oor ain here: an' for a' that time I ne'er seed a body forby a cadger on his pownie, an' ae nicht in an awfu' storm, I sleepit in a shepherd's cottage. Na! na! Strathgled. I canna tell ye mair, an' ye're no' to ask."

“Oh!” I replied, “I beg your pardon, Ishabel, I spake hastily with my tongue; but now there’s another question I am sure you will let me ask. You told me the other day, when we spoke of things not altogether of this world, that you had yourself had some experience of them; and you spoke sairly of us low country folk for not believing in them. Will you tell me what you may? for your own old stories have lived with us, and I have kenned them from a child.”

“Weel, Strathgled,” said the old woman, relaxing again into attitudes and expressions of a sorrowful and solemn tenderness, “I hae na’ far to go to tell ye that. In yer ain hoose, an’ in yer ain family, I hae seen the things that ye mean; an’ it’s weel ye said when ye spak o’ them as no’ a’thegither belonging to this warld; for, believe me, Strathgled, we’re leevin’ in a warld o’ speerits, an’ some o’ them’s i’ the body an’ some o’ them’s no, an’ it’s but whiles that we can see them; but they’re a’ about us, an’ when it’s His wull He lets us hae glints o’ them, jist as signs till us no’ to think the veesible warld’s a’ that we hae to do wi’; an’ it’s whiles to warn us, an’ whiles to comfort us, that He lets this be done. Noo, Strathgled, I was saying that I hae na’ far to

go to let ye see what I'm meanin'. Ye may hae heerd tell that your faither had a wee brither that was aboot twa years aulder than himsel'; an' your gran'faither, the auld Laird as they ca'd him in my day, he had an awfu' notion o' that wean that was his firstborn. Weel, the bairn took ill an' died, an' your gran'faither he was that wae I thocht he wad hae fainted on the bed when the wean's een were closed. Weel, the next morning when I got up an' looked oot o' my window that was abune the nursery, I seed upon an auld ash-tree that stretches oot its airms frae the castle bank till ane o' them maist reaches the castle wa',—I seed, sittin' on the brainch that was nearest the nursery window, a white Doo'.* Now, ye ken, Strathgled, as weel as me, that the tame Doos dinna sit on trees when they can help it, an' never before had I seen a Doo on that tree in a' the years I had been at Strathgled. But, oh! I was fain to see it, an' I ran doon the stairs to see if I could find the auld Laird. So I ran to the library, an' went raal canny intult, no' to disturb him on the suddent. An' there was he sitting in his airm-chair beside the fire, and he was glowering into the fire half dazed like, an' noos an' thans he wad luft up the

* Pigeon.

palms o' his haun's jist a wee bit, an' then let them fa' again. So says I, speakin' till him, 'Laird, wull ye come wi' me for a wee minute till I show ye something?' Then he started up when he heerd my voice, for he had a great notion o' me; an' said he: 'Ishabel, mony's the time ye hae said that to me, when it was to see some wee thing the bairn had jist learned to do; but what can ye hae to show me noo?' But he follow't me for a' that he said that; an' I took him into the nursery an' past the bed whare his bairn lay deid, even furrit on till the window, an' then I said till him, 'Noo, Laird, do ye see that?' an' I pointed to the white Doo—an' I'll assure ye, when he seed it he turned that pale, 'maist as pale as his bairn was—an' after he had glowered at it for a while, as he could na' tak' his een aff it, he turned to me, an' said, 'Ishabel! what in the world is that bird doing there?' An' says I to him, 'Ye may weel ask that, Laird, for the puir bird's no' doin' naething for itsel', nor did it come there by itsel'. It has been sent, an' if ye turn roond an' staun' beside the bed whare your wean's lying ye'll see its body, an' when ye look oot this way ye'll see its speerit, or the sign o' it, that has been gi'en ye frae the speerit warld. An' ye maun tak' it, Laird, as

dootless it has been intended for ye.' An' wi' that the colour cam' back into the Laird's face, an' he clasped his haun's thegither for very joy; an' a' the mair as the Doo rested there a' that day, an' it was still sittin' there the nuxt morning when the licht cam' on the auld castle an' shined thro' the brainches on the white Doo's feathers. But that's no' a'. The auld Laird, when that nuxt morning cam', an' when he seed the same Doo stull yonder, he could na' believe it, an' he thocht it maun be a veesion or that something had gane wrang wi' oor een. So says he to me, 'Ishabel, I'll go to see if yon bird's raaly a bird, for I ne'er heard tell o' the like o' it.' So says I till him, 'Ye'll do weel to gang, Laird, that ye may be saitisfeed, for ye wull be.' An' ye're grandfaither, he went oot, and roond by a wee graivel path that went roond the castle close till the verra wa's. An' when he cam' under the ash-tree he luftet a wee bit chucky stane frae the graivel, an' he jist jerket it up i' the air fornent the Doo. An' the Doo jist gied a wee bit hotch upon the brainch, and coored doon again. But the Laird he seed it move, and he seed that it was na' a veesion, but jist, as I tell't him, a real Doo. An' when he seed that, ye'r grandfaither, he aff wi' his hat, an' steppet back wi' his heid bent,

jist as if he was in the praisence o' the burning bush, an' he maun keep his face aye to the Doo, and wadna turn his back, but jist stepped back and back till he cam' till the big toor whaur he be to be oot o' sicht; an' then he put on his hat again, an' says he to me, when he came in, 'Ishabel, ye were right. It's a' true, God be thanket.' An' I'll assure ye, Strathgled, that, after that day, your gran'faither was a changed man; for he was aye minded o' the Scriptor that says, 'Show me a token for guid;' an' that was the way he took it, and was glad."

"Oh, Ishabel," I said, "I'm so glad you have told me this curious story, for it accounts for something I remember when I was a boy. We had been shooting some of the pigeons, and I shot a white one and brought it to my father, and he seemed so vexed. I could not understand it."

"Weel," said Ishabel, "your faither was ower young when his wee brither died to ken onything about it; but nae doot he heerd tell, when he was aulder, o' the white Doo that waked his wee brither; for it was weel known to a' that was in the castle at the time, for 'maist a' had seen the Doo thae twa days sittin' cooerin' on the brainch fornint the nursery window."

“Now, Ishabel,” I said, pursuing the conversation, “I understand appearances like that, in the way you have explained them—that is to say, the providential use o’ common things as signs and tokens to them that see them. And I don’t need to ask you about the foreseeing, whiles, o’ things to come ; for if they are to be, it is nothing but a veil that keeps us from seeing them, and it’s no hard to understand why that veil should be lifted now and then just for special purposes. But you know, Ishabel, that you Highlanders are full of notions about fairies and sic like ; and there’s a lochan on your own hill called the ‘Fairies’ Lochan,’ and you seemed quite angered yesterday when I told you that David Johnson, the keeper, called it ‘all havers.’ ”

“Ye’re richt, Strathgled, I was angered ; but no’ aboot the fairies ; for I canna expleen aboot them nae mair nor yersel ; an’ I maun tell ye that they’re less seen than in my young days, mair nor a hunder year gane by. Maybe they’re gane frae us wi’ the incoming o’ the lowland sheep ; for naebody sleeps on the hulls noo, as we a’ used to do when I was a wean, for aboot twa months o’ the year. Ye ken that in thae auld days we didna ken that sheep wad leeve a’ the year on the hulls ; and if we had kent

it we hadna the sheep to pit oot upon them. So ye see to get ony guid o' the fine grass on the hulls, we had to drive oor beasts up there an' stay wi' them, and herd them, an' mulk them 'maist day an' nicht. An' it was a gran' time for us weans, picking the averens* an' the blaeberries an' sittin' roond the fires when the parritch was made wi' warm mulk for oor breakfast. An' we sleepit in wee bit bothies jist made o' turf an' a wheen stanes for a foondation; and we had wee holes to keek through an' to let oot oor breath an' to let in the air. An' in the fine moonlight nichts we used to speak ane to anither aboot the fairies that made green rings i' the muirs whaur the heather wadna grow, for the fairies liked the rings to dance on. An' maybe it was the speakin' aboot it, an' thinkin' aboot it, that jist put it mair an' mair into oor heids; an' then, whiles, we thocht we seed them i' the nichts—for I mind weel nane o' us iver seed the same thing—some said they had seen ae thing an' some anither; an' it was aye when we were inside the wee bothies an' keekin' frae the holes, an' there was naebody movin', an' oorsels, we were maybe expectin'. But whatever, Strathgled, it was no in every place that thae things were seen.

* The cloud-berry.

It was aye in certain places ; an' yon lochan, wi' its shielin's aboot it, was ane o' the places. Mony mony's the strange lights I hae seen frae the wee shielin' we sleepit in : whiles like rinnin' on the groond, whiles luftit up ower oor heids, an' fleein' aboot the muirs. An' for that maitter, sic lights hae been seen aften an' aften frae this very clachan, an' are seen whiles at this very day : an' him they ca' auld Dugald here—tho' he was a wean when I was an auld wumman—he's an elder o' the Kirk, an' he tell't me no lang syne that thae lights were—what ye ca' it in the low kintray tongue supper . . . something ?”

“ Oh,” I said, helping her, “ I suppose you mean ‘Supernaetral.’ ”

“ Aye, that's the very word ; an, there's nae siccan a word in Scruptur an' there's no the thocht it means : for the things o' the speeritual warld are aye spoken o' there as if they were the maist naetral o' a' things. But the lights they tell me they see frae their ain doors doon here, are naething to the lights we used to see in the auld days when I was a bairn, on the taps o' thae hulls an' in the wee corries amangst them i' the fine moonlicht nichts, an' espeeially when the moon was maistly

by, an' when the very wunds were quiet, an' when the gloamin' in the sky to the nor'ard lasted through half the nicht. Och, och! Strathgled, thae were happy days, yon; an' mony mony's the sair heart I hae when I think o' the generations that's gane awa' o' them that hae been the children's childer, since my shielin' days!"

Touched, but at the same time fired, by the poetry and pathos of the old woman, I conceived an irresistible desire to spend that very night upon the hills.

"Ishabel," I said, "do you know what I'm going to do? Yesterday, as we were coming down the hill, the moon was rising; and this very night it will be full. It is a splendid day, and it will be a grand night for me. I'll go alone to the shieling where you were wont to be as a child; and may be," I added, "I'll see some o' the things you used to see."

"Ye'll no see that," said Ishabel, "if ye dinna pit frae ye the dour speerit that used to vex me amang your low kintray folk when I was doon amangst them."

"Oh, but Ishabel," I said, "you have saved me from that. Your Highland stories lasted all my

father's life, and they'll last mine ; little as I thought of ever seeing her that told them."

"Weel then, Strathgled, ye may gang up to oor hull ; for ye're young an' strong ; an' if my auld legs wad carry me as they used to do, I wad like fine to see the auld shielins ance mair afore I dee. But it may na' be."

I then went out to the shed that passed for a stable in the clachan ; and, calling to the driver, I told him to take the dog-cart home to Achnashee, and to tell the Colonel that I intended to remain all night on the Kilkiaran hills ; and that I should be much obliged if he would send for me next morning about eight o'clock. These instructions the driver received with much astonishment, his mouth wide open, but he said nothing. So, taking out of the dog-cart a good Ettrick Shepherd's plaid that had done me good service on our "pudding" hills of the south, I resumed my place at the fireside of old Ishabel, and pursued my inquiries so far as I thought it prudent and respectful to do so.

"Now, Ishabel," I said, "I dinna like to ask you any questions that you don't like to answer ; but you'll understan' that the story of your life is of deep interest to me, for I have heard of you dimly,

all my days ; and I have friends who will never believe I have seen you in the flesh if I cannot tell them something more than that I met you here by accident. I think you spoke of your children's children."

"Ay, did I, Strathgled ; an' I'll tell ye a' that ony body needs to ken aboot me. When I cam' back frae the low kintray,—it's aboot eighty years noo gane by—I was soon married upon a dacent man o' the name o' John Grant. He was a joiner to his trade ; an' we were thegither in this warld aboot forty years ; an' it's anither forty since he gaed awa' ; an' we had four children ; three o' them were lassies an' ane was a boy, an' they're a' i' the kirkyaird noo. But ane o' them was married an' left five childer ; an, they're a' deed noo ; but ane o' them had bairns, an' some o' them are leevin', an' the lassie that serves me in this hoose is ane o' them. She's like what ye ca' my great grandchild ; an' she's never gane to service i' the low kintray, for she was needed at hame jist to keep me ; for I was still aye in the way. An' that's why the lassie canna speak nae English, for she's been here a' her days. An' there's a brither that works the croft that oor late Laird here gied to my husband when he gied up his trade o' joiner. An' in the forty years I was a married wumman, I

had mony sair troubles, that there's nae need to speak o' noo. Not but that John was a good and obadient husband unto me, an' I'm looking to join him again soon in a better world. For noo, Strathgled, ye'll see what a world o' death and sorrow this airth has been to me,—for a' the Lord's mercies, and they hae been mony indeed—an' hoo I hae seen the generations come an' go before me jist as if I had been a lone hull tap, like some o' them that's abune us here. But there are glints o' sunshine on my auld heid yet, an' ane o' them has been seein' you; for my hairt is no cauld yet, an' I hae mind o' a' the kindness I had frae your grandmither an' a' the love I had for your faither when he was a wee boy. An' noo, Strathgled, afore ye go to the hull the nicht, ye maun hae supper wi' me; an' it's no much that I hae to pit afore ye, but ye'll no mind that, Strathgled, I ken fine, for ye're jist the very dooble o' ye're grandfaither, an' he was a kind an' freendly man, and mony's the meal o' 'taties an' mulk he used to hae amang his ain folk."

"Well, Ishabel," I said, "in whatever else I may be like my grandfather I am certainly like in that; for there's nothing I like better than just what ye hae in this hoose."

And so, leaving the house to let the fat lassie prepare our meal, I spent an hour or two in exploring the deep ravine, and its brawling torrent, that passed near the clachan. I found every square yard of ground a perfect garden. All the three kinds of heath and heather, harebells, potentillas, and the little blue milkwort, and flowers of many other kinds; whilst, in all the softer ground, beds of bog myrtle made the air fragrant with its powerful odour. On my return to the cottage, I found a little table set out by the side of the old woman, covered with a very clean though rather coarse cloth, and an ample provision of beautifully boiled potatoes, jugs of foaming warm milk, oat-cake well baked and toasted at the fire, cheese, and a few smoked or kippered herrings. Above all, the fat lassie was decked out in her Sunday "braws," and very braw they were. It was difficult to conceive where they had been kept and brought from; but a rough wooden chest near one of the box beds revealed the secret. Hunger, and the charms of interest and expectation, lent enchantment to the meal, and never did I enjoy any dinner so much as that one at Ishabel's fireside, the peat smoke curling past us and

over our heads till its wreaths seemed to shoot out of the aperture in the roof.

Ishabel did the part of hostess with that natural ease and grace which is common among the Highland people. The fat girl waited on us with a broad smile on her good-humoured face, whilst Ishabel's countenance bore witness to the happiness it gave her to entertain "the bairn o' the bairn" that she had nursed and loved in her own youth. I could now see by the light of a couple of dip candles some marks of great age which had escaped me in the shadows of the unilluminated cottage. Her eyes, which were naturally of a dark hazel, were invaded deeply by that ring of milky white which comes in advanced years. But I saw what Nelly had described to the Colonel and myself thirty years before as one of the recollections of her own childhood; that "far-away look" which almost seemed to interpret and explain the words of Scripture, "as seeing Him who is invisible." Her gestures, too, in speaking, with her hands and arms, were eloquent and dignified; and Nelly's description rose to my remembrance, "Ye wad hae thocht she was a queen!"

The sun had set some time before our meal and talk were over. Then, rising and wishing Ishabel

good night, I said, "I hope I'll see what you have seen."

"Ye'll see naething, Strathgled," said the old woman gravely, "that ye dinna tak' wi your een to see; an' mind, ye'll no' see naething if there's a hair o' yer heid ootside my auld shieling."

When I stepped out of the cottage into the open air, I found that the moon had sailed up into the heavens through a considerable arc, and was shining with that colour of greenish gold, set against a sky of purple a little roseate, which is not uncommon in the finest weather. My walk up the hills was most enjoyable: nothing broke the stillness of the air except the subdued sound of some waterfalls, and one interruption of which I was myself the cause. Seeing a low, flat boulder stone in my path, I jumped upon it, and jumped down on the other side. In doing so I disturbed the slumbers of a family of curlews which had established there their quarters for the night. The old birds rose in the greatest alarm, with that loud note, half scream, half whistle, which is characteristic of the species. I then had occasion to observe what I had noticed once before, the very feeble power of even the brightest moon to illuminate small objects sufficiently to keep them

long visible in the air. The curlew is a largish bird with a wide spread of wing, and in daylight can be seen far away. But these curlews seemed to vanish into thin air within a very few yards of me, although their voices kept ringing among the ridges and rocks in front of me for a long time and apparently for a long way. The moon had made but little progress towards her setting when I reached the shieling. I soon found the one which Ishabel had indicated to me, as the rest of her childhood more than a hundred years ago. I found its enclosure thickly carpeted with the young and elastic shoots of heather, whilst on the top of the low elevations which indicated the old walls, the heather had been cropped close by the muirfowl. Lying down in this most comfortable bed, I wrapped my plaid round me, and lay looking now at the moon on the distant sea, and now at a few ripples on the lower end of the lochan which just caught a few of its rays. The fragrance of the air, the perfect peacefulness of the whole scene, together with the soft elasticity of my heather bed, threw me gradually, not into a profound sleep, but into a state of perfect rest and of half-sustained consciousness.

Roused from this when the moon was dipping

slowly into the sea, I took out my shoulder telescope and brought it to bear upon her disc. Not many know the effect of doing this, and the visible revelation which it makes. In southern Europe and in the East, the air is so clear that we do not merely know that the moon is a globe, but we can see that it is a great ball suspended, without visible support, in the immensity of space. In our climate this is never, or is very rarely, seen. The moon is a circle like a plate; but a glass, even of very low power, reveals to the eye all that is seen by unaided vision in the lands where the heavenly bodies have ever made the deepest impressions on our race. Nor was my look at the setting moon devoid of other, and more earthly, revelations. To my surprise I saw passing across her disc and the field of my glass, small companies, and some strings, of wild fowl. All our world was not asleep! The happy birds, with their wonderful powers of aërial flight, were busy on their journeys round me and above me. The very air was evidently full of living things which had all the landscape below them spread out as a map, with its dark mountains, and its shining lakes, and its wide spaces of the sea. Trying to imagine and to reproduce what such scenes would

represent to us, how it would displace our ideas of hills which we call lofty, and of distances which we think considerable, I fell again into a half conscious reverie. During this time the moon finally disappeared and the stars came out into brilliance.

Suddenly, I saw or seemed to see some lights of the phosphorescent colour and size of a glowworm issuing from all the holes and crevices of the rocky scaur which formed the opposite bank of the lochan. They were innumerable. Every rock and stone seemed to throw out a group of them. For a moment they remained steady; but in another moment they broke into a perfect cataract of glowing light tumbling headlong down to the margin of the lake. In another moment they had passed over the water far enough to reach a large bed of water-lilies. On these they moved in mazy dance, and increasing in the brilliancy and intensity of the light, as fire-flies do in their descending flight. I could not make out the forms. All outlines seemed to melt into various degrees of radiance. Sometimes they wheeled in circles on the surface of the still dark waters, like those brilliant little beetles which play in circles on the surface of a little pool in summer. But the most beautiful effect was

when they perched themselves on the open petals of the water-lilies and then threw their aërial hues downwards among the golden anthers. I noticed particularly how the petals did not bend the least under any weight, and how the large flat leaves imparted no tremor to the water from the shining beings who danced upon them. Presently I saw as if it had been little fleets launched, and naval encounters imitated: again I could not see the shapes distinctly, but some seemed to me to be the shells of hazel nuts, whilst others were in miniature like those galleys of the Vikings, which used to swarm, in centuries long past, all along the seas below. Suddenly two separate squadrons emerged from a bed of reeds at the lower end of the lochan, amongst which I had observed their gathering lights some minutes before. They issued with a rush, as if moved by powerful banks of oars, although not the slightest disturbance was made by them in the stillness of the water. In the middle of the lochan they seemed to wheel against each other and to have an encounter: then one of them gave way and dashed off towards the shore above which I was lying. Attracted as a needle is by a powerful magnet, my eyes seemed compelled to follow them, and refused

to allow them to be obscured by intervening projections in the bank. Unconsciously they were stretched forward to hold the sight. In an instant all the lights were extinguished, and nothing remained but the placid water, reflecting a few of the more brilliant stars. The rocks were of a cold grey and black, cut clear and sharp against the pale after-glow which lasts for hours in the Highlands in the north-western horizon. This sudden and indeed instantaneous change roused me into a fuller consciousness, from a state of almost complete absorption. Then it flashed upon me how Ishabel had said: "If there's but a hair o' your heid ootside the auld shieling ye'll no' see naething!" I had certainly stretched my head beyond the line, and the forfeit had been paid. So wrapping my plaid about me as old Nelly had described the habit of Highland drovers, I shrank back upon the soft elasticities of the heath inside, and fell fast asleep.

When I awoke, the first rosy touches of the dawn had begun to appear over distant mountains in the east. Descending the hill slowly, I had reached the final steep but grassy slopes which fell towards the clachan, when my attention was drawn to a

considerable herd of red deer, which were advancing at a rapid trot towards the ravine and burn which separated the hill on which I stood from extensive moors on the other side. I stopped to watch them. They seemed as if on the way from some favourite pasture to some other place of quiet repose during the day. On approaching the ravine, they descended it at a little gap or pass, opposite to which the stream was less turbulent, and where its waters collected in a long shallow pool. They were led by some large stags with splendid antlers. When they had gained the bottom of the ravine, I was amazed to see them pass through the stream without the slightest disturbance of the water, and without the slightest sound of splashing. They then breasted the hill on which I stood, mounted its slopes like an army of men at a steady charge, crossed the path in front of me, not more than 150 yards off; and were presently seen on the sky-line to my right, the antlers disappearing slowly and gradually like the spears or bayonets of a body of men as the slight declivity of the ground kept them in sight long after the bodies of the deer were hidden from my view.

On pursuing my way, I found that not the vestige

of any foot-print was left on any of the soft and boggy bits of ground through which I had seen them pass,—the very dew-drops on the grass and rushes were undisturbed. I had not heard from Ishabel of any phantom deer being ever seen even on the visionary heights of Achnashee. So, pursuing my way, and halting so as not to reach the clachan too early, I knocked at my old friend's door about seven o'clock. The stout girl opened it; and the old woman, though in bed, was sitting bolt upright, with a shawl or plaid round her of black and red chequers. She received me with open arms, and when I approached her said: "Weel, Strathgled, I ken fine that ye hae seen the lights; for I dreamed o' them, an' I hae seed what ye seed. I'm weel assured o' that!"

"Yes, Ishabel," I said, "I've seen a great deal more than ever you told me about; for beside the 'lights,' as you call them, I have seen a herd of deer that went through water without disturbing it, and ran over soft and boggy places without leaving a single footstep."

"Oo," said Ishabel, "an' ye hae rāally seen that! Weel, Strathgled, I hae never seed it; but I hae aften heerd tell o' ithers seein' it; an d'ye ken,

Strathgled, it's maistly been seen by low kintray folks an' no by Hielandmen. It's jist as if it were sent to gar them think an' to fin' oot that there's a wheen things they dinna understand i' this warld. But you dinna need that, Strathgled, I'm thankfu' to say. It'll do ye nae hairm whatever," added Ishabel, after a long pause.

"Now, Ishabel," I said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I must go home early to-day to Ach-nashee, and the dog-cart will be here for me. It is not come yet; but if you'll tell your lassie to give me a bit of oat-cake and a jug of milk, I'll walk on to meet the man. And I mean, as soon as I possibly can, to bring your new Laird here to see you. He heard of you often in his younger days."

"An' mony's the lee he's been tell't," interrupted the old woman.

"Oh, never mind the stories he has heard! But I can hardly persuade him that you are alive."

"An' nae wonder," said Ishabel; "I can forgie him that, for mony mony's the time I hae wondered for what purpose I hae been preserved in this life, when a' that was aroond me in my braw days hae passed awa'. I'll be glad to see oor new Laird. A'body speaks weel o' him, an if he's been an auld

frien' to the Strathgleds, he'll be an auld frien' to me."

The milk and oat-cake did not detain me long; and in a few minutes I was on my way home; and, soon meeting the dog-cart, I was enabled to rejoin the Colonel just before his breakfast.

"Well, Laird," he said, when I entered the room, "I hope you have found more 'traces' of the auld wife that you have discovered who is above a century old?"

This was said with a little jeering laugh, which was the sure sign of obstinate incredulity, and of pitiful contempt for the follies of his friends.

"Oh, Colonel," I replied, "I'm not going to argue, but I'll make a bargain;—if you'll give up your fishing for one half day, and will drive with me to visit a woman who—whatever else she'll be—is at least the oldest tenant on your estate, I'll take any bet you like to name that we shall return home agreed."

"Well, done!" said the Colonel. And it was soon arranged that as the Colonel had some special business on the morrow, our joint expedition should be made on the day following. On that day after

to-morrow to which we are all so apt to postpone our resolutions !

Meantime, as I had gathered from Ishabel's language about the deer that the phantom herd was known and spoken of by many in the place, I determined to try the Colonel on this point.

“Colonel,” I said, “we'll have no discussion about the woman till we have seen her together. But possibly you may believe what I have seen with my own eyes in the rising light of this morning's sun. I must congratulate you on a fine herd of deer you have on this estate !”

“What deer ?” asked the Colonel in great surprise, lifting his shaggy eyebrows, and fixing a steady gaze upon me, then adding : “I have no forest and there's no forest very near us ! Ye maun be as daft about the deer as ye are about the wumman !”

“That may be,” said I ; “but I saw a herd of deer as plain as I see you now. But I allow they seemed to be phantom deer ; for they crossed a burn without splashing the water, and they ran over soft and mossy ground without leaving a trace of a footmark behind them.”

“Do you tell me,” said the Colonel, staring in still

greater astonishment, "that you have seen that herd of deer?"

"Oh, then," I said, "it seems you do know something about them already?"

"Well," he replied, "last year, soon after I came here, I had a friend from the Low Country with me who was devoted to the gun, and he was on the hills every day, sometimes returning very late. One evening he came home, telling me he saw just what you now describe, and I never saw a man so impressed by anything; and since then I have heard it said that the same vision has been seen now and then at uncertain intervals by various persons. I have been trying to account for it by the effects of mirage—some of which, as we all know, are very singular and perplexing. But I can make nothing of it!"

"No," I said, "and you never will; but you'll make something out of my old woman, and I'll tell you her explanation after our visit has been paid!"

On the second morning after this conversation a light pony-carriage was ordered to drive the Colonel and me to the clachan of Kilkiaran, our object being to reach it not sooner than four o'clock in the afternoon, as I was uncertain how late Ishabel

might habitually remain in bed. We stopped the carriage about a hundred yards from the clachan, at a point from which the road became very rough and stony, and the Colonel and I walked up to the door. On its being opened, I could see that the old woman had not yet occupied her chair beside the fire. The stout girl now approached the Colonel very softly and whispered something in his ear in Gaelic, of which language the Colonel had never lost some little recollection, although he did not speak it.

“What does she say?” I asked in the same voice.

“She says,” explained the Colonel, “that the old woman was restless and sleepless in the night, and that we had better not disturb her, as she is sleeping soundly now.”

“Ask her,” I said, “whether she has had anything to keep up her strength?” This was interpreted to the girl, whose reply was that she had taken some milk and whiskey. As an old bachelor, the Colonel knew nothing about nursing; whilst, as a family man, I had come to know only too much about it. The reply of the girl however seemed satisfactory. As the floor of the cottage, being of

dried clay, gave out no sound from a careful tread, I advanced on tip-toe to the box bed in which I had seen her two days before. When my eyes had time to penetrate the darkness of its recess, the face of my old friend revealed itself gradually to me, but differing little in colour from the pillow on which it rested. I saw in a moment that her sleep was sound indeed. It was the sleep of death. The spirit of Ishabel MacGregor had passed without a sigh or sound into that spirit world which had always been so near to her. Shocked but not surprised, I turned round and beckoned the Colonel to approach, whispering into her ear as he came close up, "She's gone! but you can see all that's left."

The Colonel, shading his brows with his hand to penetrate the gloom, at last caught sight of the face and stood rivetted to the spot. The outline or profile of the face was magnificent; more like those accidental profiles of the human face which we sometimes see on rocky precipices than in any form of flesh. It was cut clear and sharp, powerful and impressive, like the outline of a mighty crag which has fronted the blasts and the waves of ocean for some unknown period of time. After he had stood gazing for a few moments he turned to me and whis-

pered: "I believe you now; never have I seen a human face with such marks of extreme age."

The poor girl had now been attracted by our movements and our whisperings; and, as the terrible truth flashed upon her, she rushed between us and threw herself on the body with a prolonged and piercing wail. Vain was the help of man. We turned and left the cottage, sending messages to some of the neighbours of the event which had taken from amongst them the last link with many generations, and asking them to help the poor girl, whom we could only leave in her distress.

I had before arranged to bring my visit to the Colonel to a close on the following day; but I now felt this to be impossible. I could not leave the country before the last honours had been paid to the old friend of my house and family, and who besides seemed to me to be in many ways quite the most remarkable woman I had ever known. Cottagers cannot postpone such matters long, and after an interval of three days, the Colonel and I returned to the clachan of Kilkiaran to attend the funeral. There was a large attendance from all the surrounding country side. The plain black coffin was laid upon benches just where her own chair used to stand.

That chair itself was reserved for the Colonel, to which the bereaved girl invited him. The minister of the parish conducted a short but impressive service—impressive to others apparently from the emotion it excited—impressive to me, who could not interpret a word, from the voice of the minister and the demeanour of the people. When the service was over, two men lifted the coffin as easily as if it were a feather's weight and moved with it to the door.

The Colonel took the opportunity of introducing me to the minister, who was a reverend old man, with hair as white as driven snow.

“Have you known her long?” I asked of him when he spoke.

“I have been minister of this parish these forty years or more, and when I came to it Ishabel was then the oldest woman in the clachan, and was commonly called the old mother of Kilkiaran. Her ascendancy in all the counsels and concerns of the people was undisputed. I must confess that I regarded her with a kind of awe. She knew her Bible better than I did, and her spiritual applications of many passages were often as new to me as they were full of light. But we must go,” he added, as

the last member of the little congregation left the cottage to surround the bearers outside.

On joining them the Colonel and myself were invited to follow the chief mourners, who were two of Ishabel's great grandsons. On leaving the rough stones of the clachan, we found ourselves on an old, grassy, but tolerably smooth road, which led along the lower slopes of the same hill which I had ascended in another direction a few nights before.

"Where is the churchyard?" I asked the Colonel, who merely replied, "You'll see presently;" and accordingly we had not walked half a mile before we found ourselves on the top of a steep bank with another similar bank at a little distance, and between the two a small glen or valley through which a burn ran, making its own sweet music in the silence. To my great surprise, immediately under the opposite bank which there receded from the burn for a considerable space, we looked down on the broken gables and crumbling walls of a very small, but apparently very ancient, chapel. The rowan trees on the steep bank behind it were hanging their scarlet clusters almost directly over it. Round it there was a rough enclosure; and, amidst ferns, sedges, and meadow-

sweet, and all the varieties of an unchecked mountain vegetation, we could see a few tombstones and one remaining cross. This was Kilkiaran, the cell or chapel which had been built some 500 years ago, probably on the site of a much older and more frail erection, dedicated to St. Kiaran, one of the companions of St. Columba. I had often heard of these old chapels as common in the Highlands ; but I could hardly have imagined the remoteness and the wildness of such a site. Many of them had originally been selected for the purposes of concealment from the eyes of roving and heathen Vikings. Traditional sites are long retained. Changes of population, in passing from the military to the industrial ages, had left many of these sites as lonely as they had been in prehistoric times ; whilst changes of creed had destroyed the forms of worship to which they had been consecrated. But nothing has broken the continuity of feeling which imparts a more indelible consecration than any ceremony to the burial places of the dead. And therefore among the Highland people there has been a perfect continuity of reverence for those old sites and places, which for the most part are never reached by any voices but those of the curlew or the plover, but are ever being re-

visited from time to time by such mourners as we were that day.

A gap or pass in the steep bank before us, like that which the phantom deer had taken some days before, led us down to the burn; and a very old stone bridge gave entrance to the little field of heathy pasture which extended to the chapel. We found that the grave had been opened close under the old east window of the building, the arch of which, with some rude Norman mouldings, was still preserved. Into this grave the coffin was reverently lowered in the midst of an uncovered congregation, many of whom, I could see, gazed into the grave with a look not only of reverence, but of awe.

When the earth had been levelled over, a movement among the people indicated that there was still something more to do. To my surprise, I saw that an apparently very ancient tombstone had been lifted from the spot, and that it was intended to relay it over the remains of Ishabel. It was a flat stone, very rudely and yet very beautifully sculptured. In the middle was the figure of a knight in armour with a conical cap or casque upon his head—a tunic or kilt possibly of mail which descended to the knees, and a great broadsword hanging by his

side. The spaces of stone, unoccupied by the figure, were covered with low sculptured patterns of beautiful and various devices. The opposite sides and corners were never identical, but always in perfect harmony, as if the command of the sculptor over the most graceful scroll-work were indeed inexhaustible. Every interspace left vacant by the working out of any one pattern was at once filled up by something entirely different yet entirely congruous; some rosette or cross, or flower or leaf, which was in exquisite harmony with the rest. The edges of the stone were bevelled so as to present a separate surface, down which a long and lovely tendril wound its gentle curves from one end of the stone to the other. The whole was much worn by time, and by the feet of man.

“They’re surely not going to put that old knight over Ishabel’s grave,” I said to the minister who was standing near me.

“Indeed they are,” he replied; “the people here attach great value to those old stones. They love to bury their own dead below them. These stones are never dated; but some of them may probably have been here between three and four hundred years. The old knights over whom they were origi-

nally laid, have long since crumbled into dust, and successive generations, at more or less distant intervals, have been laid beneath them. It may seem to you incongruous; but after all there is a rational feeling underlying it. Those old knights were the men from whose military conduct and capacity the people of these old clachans derived the only kind of security they ever had. Whatever lands, or flocks and herds, they possessed, were acquired, and could only be held, under the protection of those swords that you see sculptured there. Old Ishabel herself had a great reverence for them. She gave to them, as she did to everything else, a spiritual and allegorical application. They represented to her the soldiers of the Cross, and the long double-edged swords were in her eyes the weapons of the Spirit; and as I know what a gallant fight she made in life through many sore trials, I am well content to think of the little that remained of her mortal body resting under these emblems of times which, in their physical aspects, have passed away."

And so Ishabel MacGregor rests there,—without a monument, without even a lasting tomb—but not, if this story lives, without a record or without a name.

THE
HIGHLAND NURSE

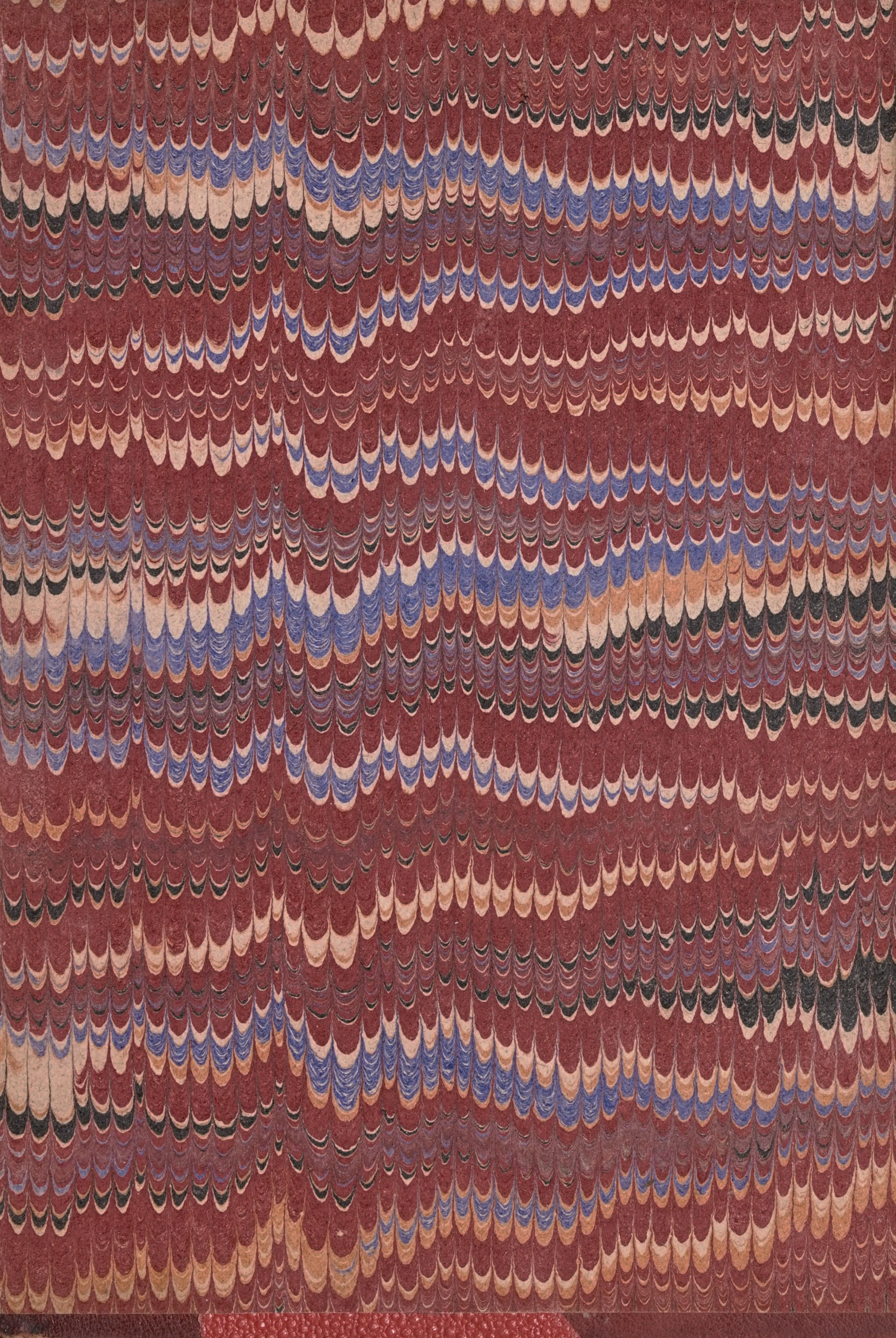
A TALE

BY
THE DUKE OF ARGYLL.

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